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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The Principle of Plainness: A Study of English and American Poetry, 1798-1935

by

©

Tiree MacGregor

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophpy

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1993

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE PRINCIPLE OF PLAINNESS: A STUDY OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN POETRY, 1798-1935 submitted by TIREE MACGREGOR in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in ENGLISH.

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June 21, 1993

. . . I only thought to make
I knew not what: nor did I undertake
Thereby to please my Neighbour; no not I,
I did it mine own self to gratifie.

—John Bunyan, "The Author's *Apology*
for His Book," *The Pilgrim's Progress*
(1678)

Abstract

When we think of plain poetry in English we usually think of the two great plain styles—the native and the classical—of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But plainness is a principle to which many poets have committed themselves down through the centuries. This study investigates what happened to the principle after the Renaissance, and is primarily concerned with six major poets who have written or intended to write a plain poetry, or a plainer poetry than their predecessors and contemporaries, and who have sometimes made statements that elucidate their particular interests in plainness. Chapter One examines the work of George Crabbe, a poet long accepted as plain, and of William Wordsworth, whose stand on diction and syntax and whose rejection of artifice contributed to his establishment not only as the most influential poet of the nineteenth century, but as the spokesman for a modern plainness whose distinguishing characteristics are simplicity, sincerity, and colloquialism. Chapter Two examines the work of Walt Whitman, who basically extends Wordsworth's theories and lays claim to a democratic plainspokenness, and of Emily Dickinson, whose poems are sometimes reminiscent of the native plain style and whose concern for definitiveness contrasts Whitman's definiteness and accounts for the plainness of her poetry in general. Chapter Three considers the work of a universally acknowledged plain stylist, Edwin Arlington Robinson, whose work proves that traditional verse is viable in the modern world, and of Ezra Pound, who, like Wordsworth, took a revolutionary stand that sought to do away with false notions of the poetic, and whose central poetic theories are deeply involved with the principle of plainness. The Conclusion broadens the perspective on plainness in the twentieth century. Plainness is a principle that in the last two hundred years has drawn the interest of poets sometimes radically different from one another. This study attempts to explain why.

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Introduction

Even when Cicero distinguished three levels of style—the plain (for proving), the middle (for pleasing) and the grand (for compelling)[1]—there was disagreement and confusion about the qualities, functions, and effects of different styles. Cicero himself points to the lack of understanding:

> Few realize that many kinds of Attic style exist. Some presently believe that to be an Atticist all they need to do is speak in an unaffected and plain manner, but they are in error. Lysias was a master of the plain style, but his eloquence was never inept. (Murphy 137)

Of course, for literature written in English, especially, for our purposes, poetry, Cicero's distinction between the plain, middle, and grand styles became fundamental. This is not to say, however, that even during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England disagreement and confusion about style did not exist, or that one was necessarily and strictly either a plain, or middle, or grand stylist, or, indeed, that individual poems were always pure and simply written according to the demands of either one or another of Cicero's neat categories.

The disagreement about style among commentators of the time might be illustrated by comparing this remark by Abraham Fraunce: "Thus much of Eloquution in tropes and figures: in al which obserue this one lesson, the more the better" (*The Arcadian Rhetorike* [1588] 105), with Thomas Wilson's emphasis on plainness in his *Arte of Rhetorique* (1555),[2] or with passages like this one from George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589):

---

[1] See §. 65 of Cicero's *Orator*, p. 138 of James J. Murphy's *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*.

[2] See, especially, Book III, 323 ff. "Some use so manye inter-positions," Wilson complains, "bothe in their talke and in their writinge, that they make their sayinges as darke as hell" (338).

> As figures be the instruments of ornament in every language, so they be also in a sorte abuses or rather trespasses in speech, because they pass the ordinary limits of common utterance, & be occupied of purpose to deceive the eare & also the minde, drawing it from plainness & simplicitie to a certaine doublenesse, whereby our talke is more guileful & abusing . . . . (154)

Ben Jonson responds to confusion about style in his censure, reported by Drummond of Hawthornden, of such poets as Samuel Daniel ("a good, honest man, had no children, but no poet") and Sir John Harington (who "loved not the truth, for [his supposed epigrams] were narrations, not epigrams" [Jonson 596]). Jonson, of course, is recognised as the great classical plain stylist of his time. Yet he could be as ornate, or sweet, as any if he chose:

> Oh, that joy so soon should waste!
> Or so sweet a bliss
> As a kiss
> Might not for ever last!
> So sugared, so melting, so soft, so delicious:
> The dew that lies on roses
> When the morn herself discloses
> Is not so precious.
> Oh, rather than I would it smother,
> Were I to taste such another;
> It should be my wishing
> That I might die, kissing. (*Cynthia's Revels* IV iii 242-53; Jonson 481)

The great master of classical plain style obviously had other styles at his command. And a rigid interpretation of the influence of Cicero's categories might finally be thwarted by recognizing the coexistence of styles in the work of Sir Philip Sidney:

> Come, Sleep, O Sleep, the certain knot of peace,
> The baiting-place of wit, the balm of woe,
> The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release,
> The indifferent judge between the high and low!
> With shield of proof shield me from out the prease
> Of those fierce darts Despair at me doth throw.
> O make in me those civil wars to cease:
> I will good tribute pay, if thou do so.
> Take thou of me smooth pillows, sweetest bed,
> A chamber deaf to noise and blind to light,
> A rosy garland and a weary head:
> And if these things, as being thine by right,

> Move not thy heavy grace, thou shalt in me,
> Livelier than elsewhere, Stella's image see. (Williams 158)

Despite the apostrophe to Sleep, the general concern for figures, and the ultimate lack of seriousness, this sonnet, number 39 from *Astrophil and Stella*, displays a certain plainness, though Sidney did write plainer sonnets. The plainness is evident in the syntax throughout (the few inversions are unobtrusive), but the first eight lines especially exemplify features of the old sixteenth-century moral or native plain style. This style is evident in the emphatic metre of lines 2 through 6 (though line 1 has a softening effect on these), in the tendency for most of the lines (six of the eight) to break down into four and six syllables (lines 2 and 8 break down into six and four), and in the apparent seriousness of the statement, which is evident in the tone, the maxim-like figures, and the diction. The "good tribute" of line 8 anticipates the shift in style that comes with the sestet, which confirms that it is the sweet or golden style that Sidney prefers. In the sestet, the rhythm noticeably smoothens, the caesural placement is more varied, and the diction ("smooth pillows," "sweetest bed," the "chamber," the "rosy garland") is chiefly that of the golden style. These qualities, however, do not run away with the poem but, as it were, modify the weightier style of the octave. In other words, much of the seriousness of the octave still remains; the tone of the sestet is not frivolous. In the last half line of the poem, the introduction of the cause of Sidney's sleeplessness, "Stella's image," is to be regretted to the extent that the more serious treatment of sleeplessness in the octave is slightly undermined. Stella is not made to obtrude as she is at the end of other sonnets by Sidney, but neither is she, as the object of Sidney's desire, treated in such a way as to be considered among the greatest causes of sleeplessness. To the degree that she is made to obtrude, she damages the poem. However, the poem is still remarkable, largely because of Sidney's experimental combination of the plain and golden styles.

But to speak of *the* plain style is slightly misleading, though one does so for convenience. The lack of understanding Cicero speaks of is in part due to the word "plain" (synonymous with Cicero's "Attic"), which, like many common abstractions, had then as it has now various meanings. "Plain" can include the language of the common man as well as what Jonson called "custom of speech, which is the consent of the learned" (572). Moreover, to appreciate the eloquence of a traditional plain style is difficult, and this is an important reason why in the twentieth century plainness has never regained the prominence it had in the seventeenth. For in this century we have not been much interested in eloquence, and many readers of poetry have found it easier to see the ornate, the arcane, and even the impenetrably obscure as inherently "poetic." The plain, in comparison, may seem to some too obvious, simplistic. With regard to metrical poetry, this is no doubt sometimes attributable to the prejudice against metre, which by this point in the twentieth century has as much to do with the reader's untrained ear as with a commitment to modernist aesthetics. Thus, Cicero's complaint is a timeless one: few will come to perceive eloquence in plainness, though in the seventeenth century a greater proportion of readers perceived it than today. Amongst even informed twentieth-century readers of, say, Sir Walter Ralegh's "The Lie" or John Donne's "A Hymn to God the Father," the plain style is essentially "dull" or "drab"[3] ; for others, these and other such poems achieve a certain passionate eloquence. Yet not only are there differences in the plainness of each of these poems, there are also, as Cicero implies, great differences of opinion as to what constitutes a plain style. Clearly, to Cicero, plainness is not achieved by speaking "in an unaffected and plain manner"; it is equally clear that there were those of his time who believed the contrary, and there are many in the twentieth century who believe the same.

---

[3] "Drab" is in fact the word used by C. S. Lewis to describe the style in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 64-65. Likewise G. K. Hamilton in "Drab and Golden Lyrics of the Renaissance," in Reuben A. Brower's *Forms of Lyric* 1-18.

Poetic method is naturally intrinsic to the question of how to be plain in the twentieth century: is free verse not an intrinsically plainer medium than traditional verse forms? is the poet who rejects the artifice of traditional metres in favour of "organic form" or "open forms" or "spontaneous composition" not able to be more natural, more direct, more true to reality? That this now old and still ongoing debate over poetic method has not been put into the context of plainness is not surprising. The preoccupation with attaining a plain style is widely regarded as a phenomenon of the English Renaissance, long dead, more or less forgotten by all but a few scholars and critics, and fewer, eccentric, anachronistic poets. The debate over the merits of free and of traditional verse is fundamental to twentieth-century poetics and is still a vital one. Yet the predominance of this debate has obscured finer and in some ways more important matters, among which is the principle of plainness. The dichotomising impulse tends to obscure distinctions. Thus, in the Renaissance the basic split between the golden and the plain styles has tended to blind modern readers of Renaissance poetry to the range of possibilities open to plainness. In our own century, the debate over method, the question of how to compose, has resulted in a dichotomising impulse (revolution and convention, experimentation and tradition, "open" and "closed" forms), though often necessary and at times extremely useful, that has tended to have a twofold detrimental effect on our understanding of plainness: (1) it has obscured the variety of styles in traditional forms that have a claim to plainness; and (2) it has obscured the fact that plainness is an end not just for a handful of so-called backward-looking, traditionalist poets, but of many so-called forward-looking, experimental ones. In other words, the central debate in twentieth-century poetics has obscured both the variety of plain styles and the very existence of plainness as a principle aimed at by poets using either of the two fundamental poetic techniques. Many of these poets would agree with the great plain stylist J. V. Cunningham that "successful formulation is clarifying," and "true simplicity is not a beginning but an end" ("The 'Gyroscope Group'" 707).

A number of very important books and essays written over the past thirty years or so—including Wesley Trimpi's *Ben Jonson's Poems* (1962), J. V. Cunningham's "Lyric Style in the 1590s" (1965), Douglas L. Peterson's *The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne* (1967), Yvor Winters' *Forms of Discovery* (1967), and John Baxter's *Shakespeare's Poetic Styles* (1980), to each of which this study is indebted—have elucidated plainness as a vital principle in Renaissance poetry. Little need be said in this study about the Renaissance, and even less might be added to what has already been so well said. But in order to emphasise both the existence of different plain styles then, and the possibility of different kinds of plainness now, a brief overview of Renaissance plain styles may be useful.

First, though, a word about how the Renaissance figures in this study. That poetry of the English Renaissance reached new heights is, of course, taken for granted, as is the view that the best short poems of the Renaissance were written by plain stylists, and that, among these, Ben Jonson was the greatest master. The theories and poetry produced during the Renaissance are thus used as a sort of mark for those of succeeding poets. They are also used, however, as a starting point. For although comparison is implicit, as well as explicit, throughout this study, the main purpose is to examine the motives and convictions of poets who express, in their poetry, their theories, or both, a commitment to plainness of one kind or another, rather than to try to establish a hierarchy of poems with those of Jonson at the zenith. To be sure, Jonson's work is in a sense the mark of plainness during the Renaissance, and in some respects even for poetry in English. But recognising this is not to deny later innovations and the need for subsequent poets to respond to their times as they saw fit. Only one poet, J. V. Cunningham, can be compared to Jonson in terms of his life's work. But Cunningham was born in Cumberland, Maryland, in 1911, and called himself "a renegade Irish Catholic from the plains of Montana" (*CE* 353). The classical plain style that Jonson mastered obviously had an important role in the development of Cunningham's plainness, but so too, no doubt, did the plains of Montana, where Cunningham grew up. Jonson and Cunningham had unique personalities and experiences, and were of different times and places; Cunningham's poetry attests to these facts as much as his biography. Still, the classical plain style informs the work of both men, and a good understanding of Cunningham would be difficult without a good understanding of Jonson. However, Jonson is a mark for subsequent plain stylists only insofar as the limitations of time and of place permit: Jonson speaks to us across the centuries as an authority on style but within the restrictions of his time and place; Cunningham, or any other poet, may observe that authority, but will have his own time and place to contend with and respond to. In other words, Jonson may represent a mark of plainness for poetry in English, but only within certain obvious limitations.

To see him, as mentioned above, as the mark for the Renaissance is perhaps more clearly true—it is certainly more easily defended. But even here a proviso is necessary. One must bear in mind that the great classical plain stylist of the Renaissance not only had both major styles—the sweet, or eloquent, and the plain, or moral—at his command, but also wrote in more than one style that may come under the general category "plain." If we look to his poetry for instruction in how to be plain we will find not a single method but several. Moreover, we might well turn to other, radically different, sources, both theoretic and poetic (say, to Puttenham's treatise, or to Gascoigne's *Certayne Notes of Instruction* [1575], or to poems like Tichborne's "Elegy" [1586] or, looking back further in the tradition, Dunbar's "Lament for the Makaris" [c.1508]), for excellent instruction in the composition of plain verse. Different ways in which to be plain were available, and these different ways, these different styles, had their own purposes, their own ranges of subject-matter and of feeling. Jonson was master of all, but his classical style is the style he is most noted for, and even though it is the highest ranking of the plain styles and is therefore potentially (the potential is in the style, the realisation in individual poems) the greatest of them, it does not diminish the real achievement and potential of lower-ranking plain styles.

There were four quite distinct plain styles available to the English poet at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In his essay "Lyric Style in the 1590s," Cunningham characterises each of these styles, and although he refers specifically to only three of them as plain, it is clear that all four come under that general term. The first style Cunningham examines is what he calls the moral but may better be called the native, reserving "moral" for what Cunningham identifies as "a particular literary kind, . . . the moral poem, which is the exemplar and pattern of the moral [or native] style" (314). Calling the style native, as Winters does, has the advantage over "moral" of specifying the origin of the style, and of being more generally applicable, as it more aptly describes the lyrical poems in the tradition (for example, Skelton's "To Mistress Margery Wentworth" and Wyatt's "And wilt thou leave me thus?"), without excluding the explicitly moral poems. That is, "native" is the more flexible term and has the peculiar virtue of being both more specific and more general. Cunningham's description of the style follows a brief discussion of the "moral poem," and is therefore somewhat slanted:

> Hence the exponent or symbol of this particular and quite limited tradition is easy to describe: a heavy-handed seriousness, a scorn of urbanity, a deliberate rejection of the delicacy which would discriminate shades of white and of black. It is a morally ruthless, secure, and overpowering style. (315)

This is an impressive definition, but as Cunningham himself said, "the virtue and defect of [his] prose is brevity" (ix), and it would appear that his brevity here has emphasised the moral nature of the tradition somewhat at the expense of the lyrical (which is not to suggest that a poem cannot be both at once). Winters provides a more satisfactory description of the native plain style:

> The characteristics of the typical poem of the school are these: a theme usually broad, simple, and obvious, even tending toward the proverbial, but usually a theme of some importance, humanly speaking; a feeling restrained to the minimum required by the subject; a rhetoric restrained to a similar minimum, the poet being interested in his rhetoric as a means of stating his matter as economically as possible, and not, as are the Petrarchans, in the pleasures of rhetoric for its own sake. There is also a strong tendency toward aphoristic statement, many of the best poems being composed wholly of aphorisms, or, if very short, being composed as single aphorisms. (*FD* 3)

Two of the poems Cunningham quotes from to illustrate the style are Ralegh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"—

> Time drives the flocks from field to fold
> When rivers rage and rocks grow cold
> And Philomel becometh dumb.
> The rest complains of cares to come.

—which he describes as "relentlessly iambic; the line is organized in two distinct halves, with two four-syllable phrases bound into internal unity by structural alliteration of stressed syllables" (313-14), and Tichborne's "Elegy":

> I sought my death and found it in my womb,
> I looked for life and saw it was a shade,
> I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb,
> And now I die, and now I was but made.
> My glass is full, and now my glass is run,
> And now I live, and now my life is done.

This, forming "the exemplar and pattern of the moral [or native] style," comes from a moral poem, which

> consists of a sequence in serial order of sententiae, maxims, or propositions of a similar kind, usually one to a line, sometimes two, and occasionally a single sententia over two lines, commonly in decasyllables and in an extended stanza, often in ballade form. The decasyllable is normally phrased in fours and sixes in iambic pattern, though sometimes in reverse order of six and four, and the phrases are bound by alliteration of stressed syllables . . . . When successful, as in Tichborne's *Elegy*, the moral poem expresses a cumulative experience of serious insistence. For it is moral, in the simple old-fashioned meaning of that term. (314-15)

As Cunningham says in "The Renaissance in England," though, the native plain style "is an impressive but not a sufficient style; it excludes too much. It cannot handle ordinary life. It cannot rise and fall" (309). So, in the 1580s, poets began to experiment with other styles. It must have been an exciting, innovative time for poetry; with the benefit of hindsight (a perspective, of course, that also has its limitations), we might say that some poets were seeking a greater means of expression, a more flexible, a freer style. The two main traditions, represented by "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love" and "The Nymph's Reply," were about equally formulaic, and both excluded too much. So poets—Thomas Campion, Sir John Davies, John Donne—attempted to emulate in English the Latin poets. What appears to have resulted first was what Cunningham calls the flat style. This style is somewhat more distinguished than the flatness found at the lower end, as it were, of the native tradition, the style of Skelton's "To Mistress Anne":

> Mistress Anne,
> I am your man,
> As you may well espy.
> If you will be
> Content with me,
> I am your man.
> * * *
> But if you fain,
> I tell you plain,
> If I presently shall die,
> I will not such
> As loves too much,
> That am your man. (Stanzas 1 and 3; Williams 7)

This is plainspokenness, without even the limited but still impressive features of the better native-style poems. It is even more flat than the examples of the flat style that Cunningham calls "the plainest of the plain styles, the *genus humile* rather than the *genus tenue*":

> See yonder melancholy gentleman
> Which hoodwinked with his hat alone doth sit,
> Think what he thinks, and tell me if you can
> What great affairs trouble his little wit. (ll. 1-4, 320)

There are, it would seem and not surprisingly, degrees of flatness. The flat style "aims at an unassuming lack of distinction, and with appropriate material has its own rightness, as in [John] Hoskyns' epitaph *On a Man for Doing Nothing* ":

> Here lies the man was born and cried,
> Told threescore years, fell sick, and died.

Like the preceding passage from Davies, this is slightly more sophisticated than the Skelton passage. Still, Cunningham says it best when he concludes that "the difficulty with the flat style, of course, is that it is flat" (321). One may be able to "handle ordinary life" with the flat style, but without distinction; moreover, the best poems in the native tradition are easily more profound and more moving—more distinguished—than the flat style is capable of.

The third plain style Cunningham discusses is one that marks many of Shakespeare's sonnets. It can lay claim to the moral concerns of the native style and has the range of the flat, while at the same time, by means of "a sparse use of elementary figures, together with a tightness of metrical control," being more pointed, more rhetorical, as in Sonnet 138:

> Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
> Although she knows my days are past the best,
> Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;
> On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
> . . .
> Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
> And in our faults by lies we flattered be. (321-22)

Cunningham calls this the English plain style (322). It is a more flexible style than either the native or the flat; its flexibility is evident in the qualities Cunningham mentions, and in the fact that, with his style, the poet is still able to use flat lines or the old fours and sixes in the same poem for rhythmical and rhetorical effect. Thus, as Cunningham points out, the first four lines of Sonnet 138 are, "except for the slight rhetorical touch of 'untutored,' 'unlearned,'" basically flat:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth
> I do believe her though I know she lies,
> That she might think me some untutored youth
> Unlearned in the world's false subtleties. (321)

Also, in Sonnet 41, Shakespeare has occasion to move from a typically prosaic, flat opening (except for the figure of liberty in line 1) to a second quatrain marked by the native style's patented line:

> Those pretty wrongs that liberty commits
> When I am sometimes absent from thy heart,
> Thy beauty and thy years full well befits,
> For still temptation follows where thou art.
> Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won,
> Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed;

And when a woman woos, what woman's sone
Will sourly leave her till she hath prevailed?

There follows a colloquial opening to line 9, limited figurative development in lines 10 and 11, and a balanced and repetitive couplet that is slightly elevated, rhetorically speaking:

Ay me! but yet thou mightst my seat forbear,
And chide thy beauty and thy straying youth,
Who lead thee in their riot even there
Where thou art forced to break a twofold truth,
    Hers, by thy beauty tempting her to thee,
    Thine, by thy beauty being false to me.

These lines, in Cunningham's terms, are in the English plain style.

"The chief technical difference," he tells us,

> between this and the Classical plain style . . . is the bareness of its diction and the regular coincidence of grammatical and metrical units, whereas in the classical style, especially when written in decasyllabic couplets, the lines are often run over, or, as Jonson says, 'broken like hexameters.' (322)

Cunningham goes on to illustrate the latter style in lines from Campion, Jonson, and Donne. The seventh of Divine Meditations also exemplifies the style:

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For if above all these my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there. Here on this lowly ground
Teach me how to repent, for that's as good
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon with thy blood. (Donne 311-12)

This is perhaps not a particularly good example of the difference between the diction of the classical plain style and that of other plain styles. Still, we have "the round earth's imagined corners" and the "numberless infinities," phrases indicative of greater sophistication. It *is* a good example of varying caesural placement, for although eleven lines contain one or more caesuras, only line 12 is divided into four and six, and only line 13 into six and four, but even these lines differ from the typical native decasyllable in that they are "run over," or enjambed. The other nine lines display an impressive array of caesural placement, and the impressiveness is mostly due to the unforced, natural feel of the lines. As in the native and the English plain styles, meaning is paramount. But there is no formula here, as in the native style, and, unlike the English style, there is little coincidence of grammatical and metrical units (contributing to this are the poem's seven enjambed lines). And, it need hardly be said, the poem is anything but flat.

Here is the style, this time in decasyllabic couplets, as Jonson handles it in "Inviting a Friend to Supper":

> Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house and I
>   Do equally desire your company;
> Not that we think us worthy such a guest,
>   But that your worth will dignify our feast
> With those that come; whose grace may make that seem
>   Something, which else could hope for no esteem.
> It is the fair acceptance, sir, creates
>   The entertainment perfect, not the cates.
> Yet shall you have, to rectify your palate,
>   An olive, capers, or some better salad
> Ushering the mutton; with a short-legged hen,
>   If we can get her, full of eggs, and then
> Lemons, and wine for sauce; to these, a coney
>   Is not to be despaired of, for our money;
> And though fowl now be scarce, yet there are clerks,
>   The sky not falling, think we may have larks. (lines 1-16, Jonson 259)

The classical plain style is what Cunningham calls "a noticeably unnoticeable style, the style of Cicero's Attic orator," who has "'a directness of speech that seems to one judging easily imitable, to one trying it nothing less so'" (*C E* 322). Cicero described the style of his orator as having a "careful negligence"[4] ; echoing him, Jonson speaks of "a diligent kind of negligence" (Jonson 580). The directness of speech in "Inviting a Friend to Supper" is marked by what Wesley Trimpi calls idiomatic purity:

> In prose, idiomatic purity refers generally to diction and syntax; the effects of rhythm, though important, are insufficiently restricted and measurable, except in cases of idiosyncrasy, to support the distinction between pure and impure. In verse, however, idiom must be coordinated with rhythm to meet the demands of meter and rhyme, and hence rhythm becomes the third term in defining the concept of purity. (*BJP* 121)

One could find no better description of "Inviting a Friend to Supper" than Trimpi's, which is here quoted in part:

> This is the fashionless style that Vives, Lipsius, Bacon, and Hoskyns describe. It has not grown old in nearly three hundred and fifty years of changing fashions; in 1616 it had avoided the Ciceronian hunt for words and was avoiding the temptations of Senecan ingenuity, which, of course, led to the same thing. The idiomatic purity . . . is as much a matter of rhythm as of elegance and currency of diction and syntax. Here the hypothetical metrical limitation, or norm, is a unit of two rhymed lines of ten syllables each, five stressed alternating with five unstressed. Jonson demonstrates Lucan's preference, *plus mihi comma placet*, and even permits the syntax to disrupt the couplet slightly by running over and making the metrical unit give in, somewhat at least, to the syntactical demands. (186)

This "fashionless" or "noticeably unnoticeable" style has had its exponents and innovators down through the centuries; it has informed the work of some of this century's great poets—including E. A. Robinson, Yvor Winters, and J. V. Cunningham. But along the way there have been other attempts to be plain in poetry, these usually being experimental or even revolutionary in nature, the poets often revolting against what they perceived as false notions of the poetic, notions that impede an honest handling of experience and real communication between poet and reader.

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[4] See Cunningham's *The Problem of Style* 102.

This study is not concerned with tracing the influence of Renaissance plain styles upon later poets, but with pointing out affinities, likenesses in poetic intention and style, and differences in style despite the similarity of intention. It posits that plainness (identical with simplicity, inseparable from honesty and truth) is a principle that has been, and continues to be, of vital importance to poets after the seventeenth century. Criticism has tended either to lose sight of the principle, or to take it for granted. Poets have often done much the same thing. The result has been the neglect of the principle in criticism and the divergence from it in poetic theory. This explains, at least to some extent, why, in this century, claims have been or may be made for the plainness of poems by Winters, Cunningham, Edgar Bowers, and Thom Gunn on the one hand, and William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, and Leonard Cohen on the other. Most poets and critics would agree with the following statement: "The search for a 'plain' style in poetry does not mean simply the slap-it-all-down manner that characterizes so much recent writing. It suggests rather a desire to eliminate all clichés of thought and expression that could interfere with the poet's efforts . . . ." But fewer would agree with the words that are omitted by the ellipses: ". . . with the poet's efforts to give imaginative expression to his vision of things" (Geddes 384). These words belong to the editors of *15 Canadian Poets Plus 5* (1978) and address the achievement of Leonard Cohen. J. V. Cunningham, in contrast, is a plain stylist who has affirmed, "I have no vision" (*CE* 431). In this century, poets antithetical to one another lay claim to plainness or are celebrated for their plainness. The fact requires explanation, and we can begin to look for the explanation in the work of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poets.

In the twentieth century, Romantic theory has had considerable influence on the principle of plainness, which is to say on modern poets' conceptions of plainness. Therefore, the first of the following three chapters examines plainness in the poetry and poetic theory of William Wordsworth. It begins, however, with a sketch of what happened to the idea of plainness after the time of Jonson, and then moves to a discussion of the style and intentions of one of the plainest of all English poets, George Crabbe, who was in some ways antithetical to Wordsworth. The second chapter turns to America and the achievements of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, who wrote radically different poetry but were both interested in plainness. Dickinson's interest is obvious when one stops to think about it, but, perhaps because of the obviousness, critics have tended to make only passing reference to it. Whitman's is less obvious, but more has been made out of his interest, which has been celebrated as plainspokenness. The third chapter is also concerned with Americans: E. A. Robinson and Ezra Pound. Like Crabbe and Dickinson, Robinson, among American poets, was an obvious choice. He is at times similar to Crabbe and the similarity is the result of influence, but, as will be seen, this is not all there is to Robinson's plainness. Pound belongs to the tradition of Whitman, but he is also an innovator within that tradition, which itself can be seen in the broader context of Romantic theory. He is indebted to Whitman's plainspokenness, but he also insisted upon brevity and clarity, and thus he refined imagistic theory with the two central ideals of the classical plain style. The main purpose of this study is to clarify plainness as having been a vital principle to each of these six important poets, as well as to the history of poetry in English since the Renaissance, not just during it.

Chapter One: Crabbe and Wordsworth

I

> *True Wit* is *Nature* to Advantage drest,
> What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest* . . . .
> —*An Essay on Criticism* (1711)

Pope's famous couplet is relevant to the subject of this chapter in that it is probably the briefest possible statement of Neo-classical poetic theory. It incapsulates the rhetorical theory of the eighteenth century that George Crabbe was to inherit and use to his own ends, and that Wordsworth was to reject more or less completely. Moreover, the theory incapsulated is inextricably linked to the problem of plainness. This is not at first obvious because the principle of plainness underwent changes between the time of Jonson and that of Pope, and had suffered neglect in the history of criticism. The relevance of plainness, and its decayed prestige, and therefore indirectly the reason for its critical neglect, is evident in the two couplets that succeed the one above:

> *Something*, whose Truth convinced at Sight we find
> That gives us back the Image of our Mind:
> As Shades more sweetly recommend the Light,
> So modest Plainness sets off sprightly Wit . . . . (ll. 299-302)

It is the sparkle, the wit, of the "What oft was thought" couplet that we, culturally, have remembered. For us, even more than for Pope, "modest Plainness" is generally subordinate to dazzle, though at times we fall back on it—appreciate it in the odd passage or poem by Wordsworth or Whitman or Stevens or even a favourite postmodernist (often giving it the name "simplicity" or modifying it, sometimes reducing it, to candour or sincerity or openness), demand it of business contracts, legal documents, and political pamphlets, need it, at times desperately, in our personal lives, in moments of crisis, in vows of love, in offering consolation.

To Ben Jonson, plainness—"a diligent kind of negligence" (580)—was an end in itself, as it was, though through different stylistic means and with different results, to sixteenth-century native plain stylists like George Gascoigne and Barnabe Googe. Jonson's mature classical plain style bequeathed the epistolary style's urbanity and polish—realised through simplicity (necessary for candour), grace, appropriateness (or respect), and, above all, clarity and brevity (Trimpi 64)—to the seventeenth century. Jonson left no systematic or comprehensive document on plainness *per se*; his views on the subject can be found in his commonplace book, *Timber, or Discoveries*, in the *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, and of course, in the poems themselves. That this is the case is indicative of the nature of Jonson's classical plain style, and of plainness as a principle. The values that made for Jonson's mature style were derived from Classical commentators and were commonplace by the end of the sixteenth century. The advent of the classical plain style in Donne and in Jonson, then, was a matter of maturation rather than revolution; change took place, but the new style was in imitation of the Latin poets, as a culmination of sixteenth-century rhetoric, not a rejection of it. A plainness manifesto from Jonson was therefore unnecessary, even unthinkable; to write one, Jonson would have had to have been more pedantic than he was.

That Jonson was a great influence on the seventeenth century is indisputable. The fascinating history of that influence—on the Cavalier poets, on the Metaphysicals, on Milton, on Dryden—does not exist between the covers of one book but is sketched in some detail in numerous places, most notably by

Wesley Trimpi in *Ben Jonson's Poems* (see, especially, 126-35). What can be said here is that by the 1680s plainness was a principle attended to by the period's greatest poet, John Dryden. There is some irony in this. For the plain style of Jonson resulted in some of England's greatest poems, "On My First Son," "Inviting a Friend to Supper," "Though beauty be the mark of praise," and "To Heaven" among them. That Dryden's style is plain can probably be taken for granted, but his sort of plainness resulted in poems—perhaps *Religio Laici* or, better, *The Hind and the Panther* (whose allegorical narrative is a structuring principle itself), if not *MacFlecknoe* and *Absalom and Achitophel* —that drew the famous remark from Matthew Arnold: "Though they [Dryden and Pope] write in verse, . . . [they] are classics of our prose" (Kaplan 419). Arnold's late nineteenth-century Romantic view of what constitutes poetry, as distinguished from prose, is liable to objection, but the nature of his criticism of Dryden is understandable. Even *Religio Laici* (1682) itself makes the point. For the "Preface" to the poem, whose epigraph is "*Ornari res ipsa negat; contenta doceri* " ("My very subject, content to be taught, spurns adornment"), contains the substance of the poem and is written in prose,[5] and this, along with the fact that Dryden guides his reader by means of marginal pointers, argues the appropriateness of prose to the subject. To put it another way, the subject or, to be more exact, the nature of the subject (a long, discursive argument), stands to profit little from the kind of attention to language that verse allows; except for the dignity inherent in the verse, and the emphases provided by the couplet, and especially the snapping shut of the closed couplet, the argument might as well have been made in prose and was, in fact, in the "Preface." That such an argument was made in heroic couplets is testimony to the possibilities of that form: it has the room necessary for long discursive arguments and is conducive to the formation of paragraphs. But, from another point of view, the couplet being turned to such a purpose does not quite do the form justice. It is not that the cause is insufficiently noble, but that the size and nature of the argument work against the fullest realisation of the form. Consequently, the couplet often lacks the intellectual and therefore emotional intensity, or, better, concentration, potential in the form.

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[5] Earl Miner stipulates the redundancy of Dryden's "lengthy Preface" as the reason for his having chosen to omit it from the *Selected Poetry and Prose*. See p. 262. All quotations from Dryden's poetry come from this edition.

The prosiness of Dryden's verse, then, is in some sense a measure of its plainness. Various remarks by Dryden (the word *plain*, often used in rhyme, is common in his verse) might be adduced to illustrate his own view of the matter. In *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), Dryden—in the guise of Neander—advocates a plain syntax and diction in verse when he extols, as Jonson did before him, "the common way of speaking" (81). (In Jonson's terms: "Pure and neat language I love, yet plain and customary" [570].) Also, he celebrates his own age as able—and this, he claims, distinguishes his age from that of the Elizabethans and Jacobeans—"to write in verse exactly" (85-86). The exactness, or regularity, of verse was a mark of the age: gentlemanliness was embodied as much in the regularity of verse as in the regularity of passion. The connection between these virtues (plain syntax and diction and exactness of verse) and the virtues of good prose is made clear in the closing paragraph of the "Preface" to *Religio Laici* :

> If any one be so lamentable a Critique as to require the Smoothness, the Numbers and the Turn of Heroic Poetry in this Poem; I must tell him, that if he has not read *Horace*, I have studied him, and hope the style of his Epistles is not ill imitated here. The Expressions of a Poem, design'd purely for Instruction, ought to be Plain and Natural, and yet Majestick: for here the Poet is presum'd to be a kind of Law-giver, and those three qualities

> which I have nam'd are proper to the Legislative style. The Florid, Elevated and Figurative way is for the Passions; for Love and Hatred, Fear and Anger, are begotten in the Soul by shewing their Objects out of their true proportion; either greater than the Life, or less; but Instruction is to be given by shewing them what they naturally are. A Man is to be cheated into Passion, but to be reason'd into Truth. (Tillotson 156)

As has been indicated, the epistolary style was advocated by Jonson, who also knew his Horace. Dryden's suspicion of rhetoric (seen clearly in the last sentence quoted, even if in "reasoning" one cannot be without it), or of the "Florid, Elevated and Figurative way," is probably in part attributable to his time's fear of strongly felt passions—after all, religious fervour had led, not long before, to civil war. But it is more generally simply an English characteristic. It is this that William Bowman Piper responds to when he says of "Dryden's general statements" (moralising statements, aphorisms) that they provide that "native English ring of Dryden's verse" (115). One might argue that the tendency to moralise, whether by using aphorisms or by looser means, is fundamental to English poetry from Chaucer to Philip Larkin.[6] Concomitant with that tendency is the poet's dependence, generally speaking, on plainness. "For," as Jonson writes in the *Discoveries*, "truth and goodness are plain and open; but imposture is ever ashamed of the light" (528).

For Dryden, enjambment, or, better, variety in the degree of pause at the end of a line, was a crucial stylistic quality, making for plainness and for moralising (or, more simply, for the utmost attention to meaning), and in a large part accounting for the proximity of his verse to prose. He advocates using

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[6] The general moral tendency of the English tradition is implicitly recognised by Philip Hobsbaum in *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry* when he speaks of the tradition as "earthy, alliterative, colloquial, with a strong regard for structure and the claims of plot" (xii).

> breaks in a hemistich, or running the sense into another line, thereby making art and order appear as loose and free as nature: or not tying ourselves to couplets strictly, we may use the benefit of the Pindaric way . . . ; where the numbers vary, and the rhyme is disposed carelessly, and far from often chiming. (*Of Dramatic Poesy* 84)

Again, "breaks in a hemistich, or running the sense into another line," is precisely what Jonson advocated, at least according to Drummond:

> Said he had written a discourse of poesy both against Campion and Daniel, especially this last, where he proves couplets to be the bravest sort of verses, especially when they are broken, like hexameters; and that cross-rhymes and stanzas—because the purpose would lead him beyond eight lines to conclude—were all forced. (595)

And, of course, there is ample evidence in his poems—in "To Penshurst," "An Epistle to a Friend, to Persuade Him to the Wars," "An Epigram to the Smallpox"—that Jonson's practice was in keeping with his theory. The danger is in diminishing the reader's feel for the verse, a danger that Dryden's work is susceptible to, but Jonson's is not. Consider, for example, this passage from *Religio Laici* :

> The partial Papists wou'd infer from hence
> Their Church, in last resort, shou'd judge the sense.
> But first they wou'd assume, with wondrous art,
> Themselves to be the whole who are but part
> Of that vast frame, the Church; yet grant they were
> The handers down, can they from thence infer
> A right t' interpret? (ll. 356-62)

This brief passage displays mastery of the heroic couplet, not in Pope's manner but in Jonson's. "Running the sense" from one line to another as Dryden does in most of these lines enables him to concentrate on meaning, as we can see from the emphasis placed on "Their Church" in the second line, and on "A right" in the last, as well as on "the Church" in the middle of line 360, coming as it does between caesuras and after an impressive instance of increasing stress in "Of that vast frame." It is, too, largely because of enjambment that the cautious hint of disparagement is felt behind "The handers down," an appellation Dryden may well have consciously chosen instead of "authorities," which would fit metrically but is far less suited to his purpose. Also, we read these lines as poetry, not prose; thus, despite the enjambment, each line must be given integrity in the reading—the "sense" is run-over, but the lines are still lines. Moreover, there is a distinction between run-over and run-away lines; in Wesley Trimpi's terms, "the tension sustained by the syntactical check upon the rhythm is [not relaxed] to prose" (133). The couplet as handled here by Dryden, then, has a liberating effect: as Dryden says, "running the sense into another line" makes "art and order appear as loose and free as nature . . . ." The lines are, relatively speaking, closer to prose (and even to some free verse) than, say, the native plain style line of the previous century, but they are distinctly poetry.

It may, therefore, be said that Dryden's comments on the epistolary style are essentially a restatement of Jonson's "diligent kind of negligence." Granted, however, all that has been said of the mastery of Dryden's couplets, they yet come closer to prose than Jonson's. Here are two passages from "An Epistle to Master John Selden" that illustrate Jonson's use of run-over lines:

> Your book, my Selden, I have read, and much
> Was trusted, that you thought my judgement such
> To ask it; though in most of works it be
> A penance, where a man may not be free,
> Rather than office, when it doth or may
> Chance that the friend's affection proves allay
> Unto the censure. Yours all need doth fly
> Of this so vicious humanity.
> Than which there is not unto study a more
> Pernicious enemy; we see before
> A many of books, even good judgements wound
> Themselves through favouring what is there not found.
> . . . .
> I yield, I yield, the matter of your praise
> Flows in upon me, and I cannot raise
> A bank against it. Nothing but the round
> Large clasp of nature such a wit can bound. (ll. 5-16, 61-4)

Although the first passage quoted is considerably longer than that from *Religio Laici* and has a higher number and percentage of enjambed lines, the verse is never "relaxed to prose"—the metre, the rhyme, and "the tension sustained by the syntactical check upon the rhythm" prevent that from happening. The passage is, in other words, constructed on identical principles as the one from Dryden. The difference—that which makes Dryden's work, unlike Jonson's, susceptible to Arnold's complaint—is simply this: that whereas Jonson employs the principles in short pentameter-couplet poems—epigrams, epistles, and elegies—that are clearly focused on a single topic, often addressed to someone, Dryden employs them in long discursive poems—the term "essays" comes into vogue by the time of Pope—whose arguments lend themselves to the kind of attention generally given to prose. That we must, in such a case, attend to the poetic qualities of the lines, seems almost a hindrance; the subject matter, or the long argument, and the form seem almost to be at odds. This may seem to be stating the obvious, but what is perhaps not so obvious is, first, the prosodic connection with Jonson, and, second, that the underlying motive for this connection is the desire for plainness. Dryden is, significantly, dependent upon the logical connector "from hence" in the opening of the passage from *Religio Laici* : "The partial Papists wou'd infer from hence / Their Church . . . ." It is in small matters such as this, as well as in the larger, related issue of subject matter, that we see the reason for Arnold's judgement that Dryden's verse is "Admirable for the purposes of the inaugurator of an age of prose and reason" (Kaplan 418). Jonson, of course, used the same kind of logical connectors in his poems, which can be called "arguments" as readily as Dryden's. But, leaving aside the drama, Jonson's genres (virtually identical with his purposes), enabled him to use devices like the endearing personal touch of "Your book, *my Selden*, I have read . . ." (italics added), and the colloquial, even slightly dramatic touch: "I yield, I yield, the matter of your praise / Flows in upon me . . . ." Both Jonson and Dryden use "breaks in a hemistich, . . . thereby making art and order appear as loose and free as nature," but Jonson's matter enabled him also to achieve that clinching, judicious personal effect: "Nothing but the round / Large clasp of nature such a wit can bound."

If Dryden's prosodic principles are identical with Jonson's, they are not identical with Pope's. There are, of course, historical links between Jonson and Dryden and Pope. For one thing, each was a master of the heroic couplet. But Trimpi identifies a more crucial link, although his argument is not directly concerned with either Dryden or Pope:

> The application of the rhetorical principles of the classical plain style to English versification is most easily documented in the work of Jonson. These principles, however, are not restricted to English poems in the classical plain style; they become principles of good prosody in various styles, although they seem to have come into the language mainly under the sanction of Jonson and Donne in the 1590's. (129)

In sharp contrast to, on the one hand, the native plain stylists, and, on the other, the poets of the golden style, Jonson and Dryden had, in turn, discovered a method that freed them from formulaic writing. This is not to disparage the poems produced by the native plain stylists or by Petrarchans, which are about equally formulaic, but simply to distinguish their methods from that of Jonson and Dryden.

By the time we come to Pope, social and literary values have shifted considerably. The sociable, gentlemanly world of the coffeehouse has come to exalt not only politeness but wit, and surface politeness is often qualified by wit:

> Close by those Meads for ever crown'd with flow'rs,
> Where *Thames* with Pride surveys his rising Tow'rs,
> There stands a Structure of Majestick Frame,

> Which from the neighb'ring *Hampton* takes its Name.
> Here *Britain's* Statesmen oft the Fall foredoom
> Of Foreign Tyrants, and of Nymphs at home;
> Here Thou, Great *Anna*! whom three Realms obey,
> Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes *Tea*.

This, the opening of Canto III of *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, 1714), illustrates how enjambment and caesural placement can be used to the ends of wit. The first four lines are flat, workaday; apart from conveying essential information, their value is restricted to the contrast they provide to the last four lines. Things begin to happen in the movement from line 5 to 6—the enjambment results in an apt emphasis on "Foreign Tyrants," an emphasis which is ingeniously undermined by the second half of the line, "and of Nymphs at home." This is brought about largely by the placement of the caesura, which falls in the middle of a weak third foot. The last couplet is more sophisticated in its organisation, more complex in caesural placement, and more typical of Pope's mature practice. The association of the word "great" with the name of Queen Anne is, in terms of personal distinction, obviously satirical, but of course Anne *was* great insofar as she was queen. But even in terms of official distinction "great" is a weighted term: the monarch's greatness, or power, had been significantly reduced by the Glorious Revolution; thus, in the second half of the penultimate line ("whom three Realms obey") the satire increases. Naturally, Pope saves his punchline for the last word of the couplet and of the verse paragraph. It is achieved by means of the witty contrast between the notion of the burdened head of state taking counsel on official matters and the notion (or actuality) of her taking tea. That the two activities are joined in the same line is striking enough, but that they are spoken of on equal terms that suggest a radical indifference to the doing of one or the other—"sometimes" this and "sometimes" that—is a stroke of genius of the kind for which Pope is justly famous. The whole, of course, is heavily dependent upon caesural placement.

Pope clearly, and early on (the same principles are at work in *An Essay on Criticism*, published 1711), had a complete awareness of the possibilities of enjambment and varied caesural placement. But if his mature work represents the greatest *refinement* of the closed couplet, it also represents, ironically, a decay in couplet practice from the time of Jonson. For despite the urbanity and polish of his couplets, Pope's overriding concern for wit, though it made him one of the great poets in the language, is distinguished from Jonson's, and even Dryden's, overriding concern for matter. The flatness of the first two couplets quoted above contrasts nicely with the heightened rhetoric of the last two, and the passage as a whole illustrates the direction that Pope's genius would take. Like Jonson and Dryden, Pope sought to emulate the conversational style of Horace,[7] but instead of moving in the direction of a carefully controlled run-over couplet (which is not to say that this was the only couplet Jonson and Dryden used), he chose to move toward the highly wrought, balanced closed couplet. Thus, after the flat first two couplets above, we have the click-click of the last two. In a sense, Pope's method was more formulaic; the click-click-click, the sound of the tumblers rolling into place, the sound that unlocks the vault of wit, would be rejected by Wordsworth and his followers as "artificial," or "mechanical," and along with the clicking went the heroic couplet and just about everything that came under the heading "Neo-classical."

When Jonson commends Selden with "Nothing but the round / Large clasp of nature such a wit can bound," he means by "wit" intelligence, and the relative freedom of his couplets forms that "round / Large clasp." Pope's "true wit" is something less:

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[7] See William Bowman Piper's *The Heroic Couplet*, p. 394, note.

> *True Wit* is *Nature* to Advantage drest,
> What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*:
> *Something*, whose Truth convinced at Sight we find,
> That gives us back the Image of our Mind:
> As Shades more sweetly recommend the Light,
> So modest Plainness sets off sprightly Wit . . . .

The second couplet may have been inspired by a Classical commentator, but it echoes Jonson, who is echoing Vives: "Language most shows a man: speak, that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired and inmost parts of us, and is the image of the parent of it, the mind" (574). If the second couplet stood alone, or if "*Something*" were replaced by, or a modification for, "language," we might think Pope's view in the first two couplets identical to Jonson's. But it is not. When Jonson says, "speak, that I may see thee," the word "see," though metaphorical, is used in the common abstract sense of "understand": the metaphor depends on a dead metaphor ("see" = understand) for its meaning. Language, then, is our means of understanding. Pope's second couplet betrays comparatively little regard for meaning, both in the syntax of its first line, and—this may seem to quibble but points to an important issue—in the illogic of its second: if the first couplet holds true, "true wit" (true sparkle, brilliance) cannot give "us back the Image of our Mind." The illogic occurs because of the Neo-classical view, expressed in the first couplet, of the relationship between thought and expression. Furthermore, whereas Jonson's statement recognises the uniqueness of each person's mind and experience, Pope's first two couplets (though this is qualified by their aim at social inclusiveness) seem naively, and perhaps ominously, to ignore this aspect of reality. Jonson's concern for language is fundamental to civilisation; Pope's concern for wit is fundamental to his closed couplet. Thus, whereas Jonson's concern for plainness is inseparable from his concern for meaning, for understanding, and therefore truth, Pope relegates plainness to a subordinate position in favour of "sprightly Wit" and its rhetorical trappings.

II

> He is the plainest of all poets,—deals the least in ornament. When he gives you a simile,—as he sometimes thinks it his duty to do,—he puts it in perspicuously, adds it ostentatiously, like a Quaker sticking a flower in his button-hole. To a great poet metaphor is a more refined language, through which alone he can express his deeper meanings and hint his more refined ones. The common language of common men is abundantly sufficient to express what he has to say; and it is rarely indeed that he travels beyond it.
>
> —W. C. Roscoe, Pollard's *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage* (398)

> Flats, of course, there are, such flats as are inevitable to so comprehensive a design as his; for some of the elements that went to make up the poet's mind were refractory to poetic handling . . . . But alike from what is too abstract for poetry and from what is too commonplace, he can rise without effort to his noblest flights of song . . . . Viewed as a whole the style is adequate to its theme. It has often been falsely judged. Wordsworth has been ridiculed for failing to attain to the great manner when he was not attempting it . . . ; more often he has been attacked as prosaic when his simple matter called for the plainest speech. His first aim, as it was his great achievement, was sincerity; and the sole stylistic error of his later revision lies in a too generous concession to the vulgar taste for poetical ornament.
>
> —E. de Selincourt, Introduction to *The Prelude* (xlvi-ii)

W. C. Roscoe and Ernest de Selincourt point to qualities in the poetry of Crabbe and of Wordsworth, respectively, that distinguish these poets as having common ground. Writing in 1859, Roscoe offers a rare un-Romantic view of what it is to be a poet, although at first he might seem entirely to endorse Romantic theory:

> In the plainness and common-placeness of his ideas and language, in his absence of passion and profound insight, in his total disregard of beauty, Crabbe was no poet. Some will say nothing remains to make him one. We say, on the contrary, that . . . [t]hat man is a poet . . . who takes up into the receptive [as opposed to the "creative"] imagination any matter whatever, and reproduces it in language under any of those rhythmical conditions which are accepted as forms of verse. . . . A train of argument is not poetry . . . . But a man who gives a metrical form to a conceived train of thought (as Dryden in *Religio Laici*) is writing poetry; and he who describes in the barest words the very commonest object he has once seen and formed a concrete idea of, is an artist and, if he uses verse, a poet; he is a poet, that is, by definition. (399)

Both Roscoe and de Selincourt, then, defend the plainness of their poets. This naturally involves them in the problem of defining "poetry," or the "poetic," or "poet"—plainness, that is, at least since the Romantics, has played an important, if silent, role in the debate over what it is that poets write and critics discuss. Roscoe's definition of "poet" is clearly in the classical tradition. De Selincourt, writing in 1926, sixty-seven years after Roscoe, and seventy-six years after the death of Wordsworth, is clearly Romantic in his belief that some things are "too abstract for poetry," and in his apology for Wordsworth, who "can rise *without effort* to his noblest flights of song" (italics added). That both Roscoe and de Selincourt could defend plainness—or that both Crabbe and Wordsworth could attempt it in their poetry—indicates that the principle remained a characteristic of "traditional" poetry, as represented by Crabbe's heroic couplets, and yet was not discarded by the primary proponent of Romanticism; that this was so indicates the principle's extremely broad appeal. Moreover, de Selincourt's essentially Romantic position was then, in 1926, and is now the prevailing one, and this to a considerable extent explains why plainness has been obscured as a principle.

No longer, perhaps, do we look for the "sprightly Wit" of Pope, but we are quite eager still for the "noblest"—or, to be more exact, "intensest," the superlative we nowadays prefer—"flights of song." It is no wonder, then, that plainness seems to be for de Selincourt something of a negative principle; it is not even Pope's "modest Plainness"; it merely constitutes—in *The Prelude*—the "flats." And it is no wonder that, unlike Roscoe in his reference to *Religio Laici*, de Selincourt makes no reference to a tradition of plainness: it would seem merely to have been born of Wordsworth's desire to handle matter that was either "too abstract" or "too commonplace." The rest of this chapter will primarily be concerned with seeing Wordsworth's plainness as both a development of and contributor to that tradition. Crabbe's achievement will be considered not simply to provide an alternative to Wordsworth, but to suggest important correspondences in their poetry and to illustrate how plainness functioned as a principle for the last significant Neo-classical practitioner of the heroic couplet.

From our late twentieth-century perspective the similarities between Crabbe and Wordsworth are varied and many. Both inherited Neo-classical rhetoric: Crabbe accepted it, Wordsworth rejected it. In Coleridgean terms, Crabbe's method was "mechanical," Wordsworth's "organic." Thought and feeling existed in works of either type, but whereas Neo-classical rhetoric was governed by propriety, Romantic rhetoric (and it was a rhetoric, even though it arguably opposed rhetoric) advocated sincerity of personal conviction informed not by logic or reason but intuition. The Neo-classical poet, as P. W. K. Stone explains in *The Art of Poetry 1750-1820* (1967), "is conceived of as pursuing a specific aim, inventing, elaborating, and ordering a subject-matter in accordance with that aim, then clothing his notions in suitable language" (36). Stone reports that Wordsworth, on the other hand, "claims that his verses 'have all risen up of their own accord.' And again: '. . . at no period in my life have I been able to write verses that do not spring up from an inward impulse of some sort or other; so that they neither seem proposed nor imposed" (118). There is surely a significant difference between believing the first of these claims by Wordsworth and believing the second. But there is also every reason to conclude with Stone that for the Romantics "poetry is no longer composed, it happens" (119). These theoretical issues are often confused by imprecision in the use of technical terms (especially by the Romantic theorists), and by a vocabulary shared by both camps, and thus seem often to be a matter of difference in degree rather than kind: Coleridge, for instance, advocated "propriety" in the sense of "integrity, the poet's fidelity to an inner impulse" (Stone, 127), and "inner impulse," or inspiration, is as old as poetry itself, or at least as old as theory or criticism. Still, although Crabbe and Wordsworth shared an inheritance of late eighteenth-century rhetoric, there is a very real sense in which their views of composition—to use what is perhaps a biased but inescapable term—were radically opposed.

But as Coleridge's notion of propriety suggests, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the revolutionary entirely to reject his inheritance. Thus Wordsworth modified but never rejected the common view—one shared by Crabbe—that the purpose of poetry was to teach and to delight. The ways of teaching and delighting may have been different, but the aim similar. Furthermore, there were similarities in subject-matter, in what it was that the poet used in teaching and delighting. Both Wordsworth and Crabbe wrote about the poor or the middle class; both were interested in youth—Wordsworth mainly in the notion of the innate wisdom and in the innocence of youth, Crabbe in youthful love; both were interested in what Roscoe, in reference to Crabbe, calls the "disordered intellect," in criminality, madness, sin, or—at least for Wordsworth—mystical experience; and both were poets of nature, although Wordsworth has been labelled the "nature poet" and was concerned with nature's benevolence and beauty and the effect of these qualities upon the mind, whereas Crabbe, who according to Francis Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review* (April, 1808) gave to his details "a Chinese accuracy" (*Heritage* 58), had what might be called a neutral fascination with nature:

> For details [writes Roscoe] he had a sort of passion, and his interest in them was proportioned to their smallness. Of all observers he is the minutest. . . . Beauty invited him not in the least. Among plants he . . . [was] attracted absolutely by insignificance and vulgarity. He loved weeds for their own sake. . . . He found no subject too insignificant to be dwelt on, no trait too minute to be recorded. Hence a certain air of narrowness and pettiness distinguishes his writings. (*Heritage* 409-10)

Unfortunately, Roscoe does not offer examples of Crabbe's "narrowness and pettiness," but the quotation distinguishes Crabbe's interest in nature from that of Wordsworth, whose "description of nature," according to no less a critic than Yvor Winters, "is almost invariably pompous and stereotyped; he *sees* almost nothing" (*FD* 171). Both poets had a passion for nature, but whereas Crabbe was the close observer, Wordsworth was the enrapt lover.

The difference here is fundamental to the kind of poetry (both in form and in thought and feeling) that each poet wrote, and therefore to the qualities of plainness each achieved. Narration and description set Crabbe's heroic couplets apart from the wit of Pope's and bring them in some respects closer to Wordsworth's ballads, and even to *The Prelude*. What motivated Crabbe's and Wordsworth's interest in narration and description was realism. John Shute Duncan in "Farewell, dear Crabbe!" summarises the poet's achievement in an imitative fashion:

> Thy verse from Nature's face each feature drew,
> Each lovely charm, each mole and wrinkle too.
> No dreamy incidents of wild romance,
> With swirling shadows, wilder'd minds entrance;

> But plain realities the mind engage,
> With pictured warnings through each polished page. (ll. 13-18, *Heritage* 314-15)

And F. Sheldon, in the *North American Review* (July, 1872), sets the "plain realities" of Crabbe not against Wordsworth but Wordsworth's legacy:

> We recommend Crabbe as an alternative to those who have read too much of the poetry of our day. His hard realism is a capital tonic for minds surfeited with the vaporing verse of the nineteenth century, curiously compounded as it is of mysticism and metaphysics, fault-finding and sensuality. It is refreshing to turn from the discordant obscurity of Browning, from Tennyson's feminine prettiness, from the chaotic licentiousness and affectations of Swinburne and Rossetti, and the neat, nicely combed and curled plaits of Matthew Arnold, to plain, robust, keen old Crabbe. (*Heritage* 430-31)

Much earlier in the century, William Hazlitt responded to the realism of Crabbe by lamenting the absence in him of "golden verse":

> He sings the country, and he sings it in a pitiful tone. He chooses this subject only to take the charm out of it, and to dispel the illusion, the glory, and the dream; which had hovered over it in golden verse from Theocritus to Cowper. He sets out with professing to overturn the theory which had hallowed a shepherd's life, and made the names of grove and valley music in our ears, to give us its truth in its stead; but why not lay aside the fool's cap and bells at once, why not insist on the unwelcome reality in plain prose? (*Heritage* 302)

Indeed, Crabbe may be said to have an affinity—in description, narration, and the vigorous moral quality of his verse—with various poets who came after him, and he has no doubt influenced many (Thomas Hardy and Edwin Arlington Robinson fit in here), though his influence on novelists (Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Gaskell, as well as Hardy) is more obvious. In fact, he may well have influenced, like Dryden, not so much our poetry as our prose. Still, Hazlitt's fastidious dislike of "the unwelcome reality," and his Romantic longing for "the illusion, the glory, and the dream" that had "hovered over" country life in "golden verse," hardly constitutes judicious criticism of "plain, robust, keen old Crabbe." There is something essentially childish about it.

Hazlitt, like most of us, would probably have felt strongly sympathetic toward Caliban when he says to Stephano, ". . . in dreaming, / The clouds methought would open and show riches / Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak'd / I cried to dream again" (III. ii. 149-52). But one ought to be cautious about identifying too strongly with Caliban; we do, after all, wake up, and if we all have our logs to tote, we would be better to go about it in the manner of Ferdinand rather than Caliban. The childish longings we all have are real enough and no doubt natural to a healthy psyche, but they will not do as a basis for the scrutiny of life or poetry (which is not to say that they should not be understood). And if they invade the latter, the former is in peril. Hazlitt's criticism of Crabbe's manly, vigorous realism is therefore not only childish but foolish.

Wordsworth, a man to whom Hazlitt owed a great debt, had a weakness for the "hovering" that Hazlitt speaks of, but he was also—curiously, perhaps—intent on realism. He himself recognised the appropriateness of comparing his work with Crabbe's:

> The way in which the incident [in "Lucy Gray"] was treated, and the spiritualising of the character, might furnish hints for contrasting the imaginative influences, which I endeavoured to throw over common life. This is not spoken to his [Crabbe's] disparagement, far from it; but to direct the attention of thoughtful readers into whose hands these notes may fall, to a comparison that may enlarge the circle of their sensibilities, and tend to produce in them a catholic judgment. (*Heritage* 292)

The "imaginative influences" which Wordsworth threw "over common life" may be equated with Hazlitt's "illusion . . . glory . . . dream." But "common life," or everyday reality, remains. Wordsworth tried to be faithful to both his personal experience and to "common life"; the most famous passage in which he discusses this attempt is found in the *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads* :

> The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from *common life*, and to relate or

> describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of *language really used by men*, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain *colouring of imagination*, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an *unusual aspect*; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we *associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life* was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a *plainer and more emphatic language*; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater *simplicity*, and, consequently, may be more *accurately contemplated*, and more *forcibly communicated* . . . . (*The Prose Works*, I, 1850 version, 123-25; italics added)

The words and phrases italicised might be separated into two categories, one representing subjective reality and the powers of the imagination ("colouring of the imagination," "unusual aspect," "associate ideas in the state of excitement," "emphatic language," and "forcibly communicated"), the other representing objective reality, or realism ("common life," "language really used by men," "humble and rustic life," "plainer . . . language," "simplicity," and "accurately contemplated"). To what extent Wordsworth was successful in representing "common life" in the "language really used by men" is one thing, his claim that he did so another. Central to that claim is the actual presence of plain language, involving diction, syntax, and the use of figures, in the poems. However, the interesting conjunctions "plainer and more emphatic language" and "more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated" point to the central Romantic doctrine in which the imagination is conceived of as a "blending" or "fusing" faculty.[8] This doctrine, or conception of language, which has had various manifestations since the Romantics, including Symbolism, Imagism, and the "'objective correlative,'"[9] and which reaches its greatest expression in the primarily twentieth-century phenomenon known as the post-Symbolist method, will be discussed in relation to Whitman and to some of Dickinson's poems in Chapter Three. We may not think of post-Symbolist poems as plain, but their existence is due in part to the principle of plainness, the same principle that in part motivated Wordsworth and that more obviously motivated Crabbe.

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[8] In *The Art of Poetry*, P. W. K. Stone observes that "Coleridge almost invariably defines Imagination as a process of 'blending' or 'fusing,'" and that "Imagination is, for the Romantics, as it were a first principle of composition, and as such it has nothing in common with eighteenth-century principles of Invention. The latter are principles of association, combination, design and are clearly what Wordsworth and Coleridge intended to subsume under the term Fancy, assigning to them a secondary importance" (115). By means of fusion, the poet communicates more directly and sincerely than his eighteenth-

III

> The age is made better by such works as *The Lyrical Ballads*, and *The Borough.* Question not their claim to poetry. The denial is not founded on a proper understanding of the art. Poetry is born not only of the lofty and the imaginative, but of the simple and pathetic.
>
> —Unsigned review, *New York Review* (March, 1837), *Heritage* (359)

Wordsworth, of course, made his mark with "the lofty and the imaginative" as well as with "the simple and pathetic"; "plain, robust, keen old Crabbe" did not. "Simple" is synonymous here with "plain," and the anonymous reviewer uses the word to describe the subject-matter and themes of Wordsworth and of Crabbe in their respective works. But simplicity, or plainness, is naturally also a stylistic aim of each poet. This section of the chapter will be devoted primarily to the plainness, in both subject-matter and style, of Crabbe and partly to that of Wordsworth; the next exclusively to that of Wordsworth.

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century predecessor. The poem is thus not so much artistic statement, or argument, as an experience.

[9] Stone draws a connection between the Romantic conception of a symbol and Eliot's "'objective correlative.'" See *The Art of Poetry*, 124-25.

Very few people—even amongst poets, critics, and scholars—have read very much Crabbe; the Romantic tradition has not been kind to him, for obvious reasons. The realism, and implicitly the plainness, of Crabbe has been long and widely recognised:

> But Mr. Crabbe is all for naked and unornamented reality. . . . Crabbe's style [in the *Tales*] . . . is nothing but prose measured . . .; very little of simile, or metaphor, or allusion . . . .
> —Unsigned review, *Eclectic Review* (Dec., 1812), *Heritage* (186-87)

In 1821 Hazlitt, a vehement Romantic, called Crabbe's "song . . . one sad reality" (*Heritage* 300). John Wilson, in *Blackwood's Magazine* (Nov., 1827), spoke with some disapproval of Crabbe's

> bare delineations of reality. For the ordinary view that has reigned in Mr. Crabbe's composition of poetry, might seem to be that words and numbers might make anything into verse; and not that higher view which seems to prevail in Burns and Wordsworth, that the spirit of delineation may make anything into poetry. (*Heritage* 310)

But later in the century, George Woodberry values in Crabbe's work "transparency, the quality by virtue of which life is seen through the text plainly and without distortion . . . . He not only saw the object as it was; he presented it as it was"; "his poetry is, as he called it, poetry without an atmosphere; it is a reflection, almost mirror-like, of plain fact" (*Heritage* 454, 456). Crabbe, Woodberry admits, "had no imaginative vision," and was to that extent "unpoetical":

> [B]ut is Crabbe's true description of humble life less valuable than Scott's romantic tradition, or Moore's melting, sensuous Oriental dream, or Byron's sentimental, falsely-heroic adventure? It is far more valuable, because there is more of the human heart in it; because it contains actual suffering and joy of fellow-men; because it is humanity . . . . Unpoetical? Yes; but it is something to have real life brought home to our tears and laughter, although it be presented barely . . . . (*Heritage* 456)

So although Woodberry valued Crabbe's realism and plainness, and obviously had a critical awareness of the falsities of various expressions of Romanticism, he nevertheless held a Romantic view of the poetical. Roscoe, it will be recalled, spoke from a similar position in 1859, but offered a definition of "poet" that could include Dryden and Crabbe as well as Wordsworth. Late in the nineteenth century, however, the influential George Saintsbury demonstrates the triumph of the Romantic view:

> Crabbe is one of the first and certainly one of the greatest of the 'realists' who, exactly reversing the old philosophical signification of the word, devote themselves to the particular only. (*Heritage* 477)
>
> [T]he fault of Crabbe is that he is pictorial rather than poetic, and photographic rather than pictorial. . . . You are bound in the shallows and the miseries of the individual; never do you reach the large freedom of the poet who looks at the universal. (482)

Saintsbury believes, with other Romantics, that

> the lyre is a winged instrument and must transport. There is no wing in Crabbe, there is no transport, because as I hold (and this is where I go beyond Hazlitt), there is no music. In all poetry, the very highest as well as the very lowest that is still poetry, there is something which transports, and that something in my view is always the music of the verse, of the words, of the cadence, of the rhythm, of the sounds superadded to the meaning. (482)

The Wordsworthianism is conscious and obvious. Moreover, there is a significant connection between Saintsbury's understanding of the "particular" versus the "universal" and his notion of the "transport," or "music," of poetry: by means of the music, one transcends the particular to embrace the universal. But it is not true that Crabbe ignored the universal in his devotion to the particular; if "the old philosophical signification" of *realist* may be insisted upon, Crabbe had a firm grasp of the universal, though in the philosophical sense of that word, not in Saintsbury's, or Wordsworth's, mystical or aesthetic sense. And if it is Crabbe's short poems that are held deficient as lyrics, such a claim must be *proven*; in any case, it is well to recall that his major achievement was in heroic-couplet narratives, and that the "music" of the couplet form, and of the form's narrative purpose, is something altogether different from that of Wordsworth's ballads or blank verse, poetic achievements that lie behind the judgements made of Crabbe by Saintsbury and his predecessors.

Numerous quotations have been made to illustrate the critical reception of Crabbe's realism and plainness; it is time now to consider Crabbe's own views. Fundamental to both realism and plainness is the goal of truth, which is paramount to Crabbe: "By such examples taught, I paint the Cot / As truth will paint it, and as Bards will not . . ." (*The Village*, I, 53-4). Truth, likewise, may be said to be paramount to Wordsworth. So questions arise as to what is truth and how the poet represents it. How Wordsworth deals with this problem shall be considered in section IV. For Crabbe, the representation of truth is made possible by empirical observation ("By such examples taught . . ."), which issues in his case in what Saintsbury calls "pictorial" or "photographic" accuracy of description, and, crucially, in an appropriate relationship between the particular and the universal.

There is some point to Saintsbury's preference for the "music" of poetry over "pictorial" or "photographic" accuracy (poetry is, after all, primarily an aural art), and also for pictorial over photographic representation (whereas the former implies the discriminating mind of the artist, the latter, even if photography can be elevated to an art, implies its absence). But Saintsbury's preference for "music"—and we might say with Ezra Pound that, at least in his heroic couplet narratives, "Crabbe is undeniably reading matter, not singing matter, and he is well worth reading" (*ABC* 177)—betrays an inadequate concern for meaning, even if he speaks of "music . . . superadded to the meaning." For Saintsbury music is essential to poetry because of its power to "transport," and "the fault of Crabbe is that he is pictorial rather than poetic, and photographic rather than pictorial"; he is therefore able to conclude that, "save at the rarest moments, . . . Crabbe was not a poet'' (*Heritage* 485). But, although Crabbe may not be "singing matter," his narrative couplets nevertheless display a "music" of their own, one appropriate to the form. Furthermore, it is not sufficient simply to describe him as photographic; he was, in fact, pictorial, though not in Saintsbury's sense. Together, Crabbe's pictorial, or descriptive, skill and the "music" peculiar to his couplets resulted in a poetry whose respect for reality is seen in an appropriate representation of both the particular and the universal.

As well as "plain" or "simple" or "realistic," we might describe Crabbe's poetry as common-sensical. Like the other descriptive terms, this one reflects Crabbe's concern for audience; it is rooted in the belief that poetry is essentially public statement, although the lines themselves are formed by private judgements and may be about personal experiences. Wordsworth, too, it may be said, was a "social" poet, but, as we shall see, his poetry too often embodies an inadequate relationship between public utterance and private experience. Crabbe's poetry is moral, and the defenses he made in his prefaces of his subject-matter and methods reveal an overwhelming awareness of the poet's responsibility to his audience. That responsibility necessarily involves the poet in moral and didactic problems, and the honest and most effective way of realising one's moral and didactic ends was to be simple, or plain. Therefore, Crabbe spoke to his readers' "plain sense and sober judgment'':

> Hence [according to *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, V, 1, 12-17] we observe the Poet is one who, in the excursions of his fancy between heaven and earth, lights upon a kind of fairy-land in which he places a creation of his own . . . ; taking captive the imaginations of his readers, he elevates them above the grossness of actual being, into the soothing and pleasant atmosphere of supra-mundane existence . . . .
>
> Be it then granted that (as *Duke Theseus* observes) "*such tricks hath strong Imagination*,'' and that such Poets "*are of*

> *imagination all compact*;" let it be further conceded, that theirs is a higher and more dignified kind of composition, nay, the only that has pretensions to inspiration; still, that these Poets should so entirely engross the title as to exclude those who address their productions to the plain sense and sober judgment of their Readers, rather than to their fancy and imagination, I must repeat that I am unwilling to admit—because I conceive that, by granting that right of exclusion, a vast deal of what has been hitherto received as genuine poetry would no longer be entitled to that appellation. (Preface to *Tales, 1812, The Complete Poetical Works* II, 8-9)

As we have seen, many nineteenth-century critics denied the bulk of Crabbe's work "that appellation," or denied Crabbe the name "poet"; many, if not most, poets and critics of the twentieth century, if pressed, would do the same. Ironically, these Romantic critics and poets—and whether they are Victorians or postmodernists they are basically Romantic—would exclude Crabbe and others from the name "poet" while making liberating claims for poetry. As the Romantic movement has advanced it has tended to exclude various poets, methods, and genres on the basis that they are "artificial" or "mechanical," or lack "inspiration" or "imagination" or "creativity." Although the movement has changed the possibilities of poetry (mainly in the realm of subject-matter), it has also meant a narrowing of the "poetic," not only to exclude Crabbe and his like, but also to reduce poetic utterance in our century to the intensely private, often sentimental and even solipsistic, free-verse "lyric." Romanticism began as a revolutionary movement presumably devoted to freedom (aesthetically, from Neo-classical precepts, but also politically—the French Revolution exerted a powerful influence on the Romantic imagination, and what is the Romantic dogma on the value of inspiration and intuition if not an extraordinary expression of freedom of thought?). And it would not be the first time that a movement asserting the need for greater freedom self-interestedly adopted exclusive attitudes toward others. Crabbe's appeal to our "plain sense and sober judgment" is refreshing and instructive in the face of

Wordsworth's attitude when, in a letter to Samuel Rogers (29 September, 1805), he dismissively refers to ". . . Crabbe's *verses*; for *poetry* in no sense can they be called" (*Heritage* 292).

Whereas Wordsworth was in much of what he wrote quintessentially a poet who would elevate his readers "into the soothing and pleasant atmosphere of supra-mundane existence," Crabbe was the poet without atmosphere, the poet of "the grossness of actual being." Or, to be accurate, perhaps it should be said that Crabbe's poems do, in fact, have atmosphere, but of the sort that is closest to the ground or to the sea, and not to the upper reaches aspired to by the Romantic imagination. Often in his narratives Crabbe uses descriptive details to provide such atmosphere; the following passage comes from "The Poor and Their Dwellings" (*The Borough*, 1810):

> There, fed by Food they love, to rankest size
> Around the Dwellings *Docks* and *Wormwood* rise;
> Here the strong *Mallow* strikes her slimy Root,
> Here the dull *Nightshade* hangs her deadly Fruit;
> On hills of Dust the *Henbane*'s faded green,
> And pencil'd Flower of sickly scent is seen;
> At the Wall's base the fiery Nettle springs,
> With Fruit globlose and fierce with poison'd Stings;
> Above (the Growth of many a Year) is spread
> The yellow Level of the *Stone-crop*'s Bed;
> In every Chink delights the *Fern* to grow,
> With glossy Leaf and tawny Bloom below:
> These, with our *Sea-weeds*, rolling up and down,
> Form the contracted *Flora* of the Town. (*CPW*, I, ll. 290-303)

In a note to this passage, Crabbe apologises for repetition on behalf of accuracy:

> This scenery is, I must acknowledge, in a certain degree, like that heretofore described in the Village; but that also was a maritime country:—if the objects be similar, the pictures must (in their principal features) be alike, or be bad pictures. I have varied them as much as I could, consistently with my wish to be accurate. (*CPW*, I, 530)

Crabbe's "picture," then, of the sea-side town's flora is not sketched for the purpose of creating an atmosphere whose origins are in the poet's subjective experience. There is no ominousness about the nightshade and henbane, for instance, just a sober presentation of them. The motive for the picture is, on one level, simply objective, empirical accuracy, and the atmosphere that accompanies it is entirely appropriate to the place described. As Pound says of another passage from Crabbe, what we have here is "[p]resentation, description, in place of Popean comment" (*ABC* 175). But Crabbe, as we shall see, and as Pound knew, did not altogether eschew comment: on another level the motive for the floral passage is moral, for it is connected to the larger purpose of describing the conditions in which the poor are forced to live—in which case, the potential harmfulness of some of the plants described has symbolic meaning, and Crabbe would also appear to be commenting on the dubious graces of living close to nature. The "picture" is thus noteworthy for its accuracy, but also for its human significance.

Nature, for Crabbe, whose botanical interests led him to study it closely, was not the benevolent force that Wordsworth too often described, but an indifferent one. Crabbe's rustics are therefore always the real thing (this passage follows the one above):

> Say, wilt thou more of Scenes so sordid know?
> Then will I lead thee down the dusty Row;
> By the warm Alley and the long close Lane,—
> There mark the fractur'd Door and paper'd Pane,
> Where flags the noon-tide Air, and as we pass,
> We fear to breathe the putrifying Mass:
> But fearless yonder Matron; she disdains
> To sigh for Zephyrs from ambrosial Plains;
> But mends her Meshes torn, and pours her Lay
> All in the stifling Fervour of the Day.
>
> Her naked Children round the Alley run,
> And roll'd in Dust, are bronz'd beneath the Sun;
> Or gambol round the Dame, who, loosely drest,
> Wooes the coy Breeze to fan the open Breast:
> She, once an Handmaid, strove by decent art
> To charm her Sailor's Eye and touch his Heart;
> Her Bosom then was veil'd in Kerchief clean,
> And Fancy left to form the Charms unseen. (304-21)

In the comment, "she disdains / To sigh for Zephyrs from ambrosial Plains," Crabbe appears to be more conscious of the preoccupations of the Romantic poet than of the real abilities and concerns of people like the matron. This aside, the passage has all the atmosphere that accuracy of description can offer. It was motivated by the descriptive poet's love of details, but also by Crabbe's compassion for human beings living in squalor. The compassion resides in the details: the "fractur'd Door and paper'd Pane," the fearlessness and slatternliness of the matron accustomed to poverty, and the indefatigable vitality of her children are perfectly realised. We might, of course, be merely disgusted by such passages in Crabbe, as many of his nineteenth-century critics seem to have been (even his apologist, Jeffrey[10]). But if we are merely disgusted then two things might be said: first, the description must be extraordinary; second, the fault is ours, for implicit in the relished-in description is Reverend Crabbe's mild form of outrage. We bring our own experience, understanding, and attitudes to a work of literature, as to any work of art. Mere disgust for a passage so objectively accurate is inappropriate, at least in a world influenced by Christianity, as Crabbe's obviously was and as ours, not so obviously, still is. Crabbe invites us to "know" "Scenes so sordid": he provides the knowledge, we provide the understanding that urges compassion for the people described. When Crabbe says, "Then will I lead thee down the dusty Row," we go with him to visit our fellows, and can safely feel our guide to be trustworthy and respectful of our own judgements of the scenes that he will show us.[11] The scenes are therefore revealed without attempting to manipulate our sentiments—it is Wordsworth with accurate description and without the idealisation; Dickens without the jollity, without the tears. Pound certainly would have approved, though he would have disdained the "comment" three couplets later: "Still in her bosom Virtue keeps her place, / But decency is gone, the Virtue's Guard and Grace." With this couplet the mini-story of the matron ends and Crabbe moves on to other matters. But in the space of eleven couplets we are given an impressive description both of one woman's poverty (including, in the last couplet quoted, Crabbe's characteristic concern for the poverty of the soul), and of the nature of poverty: the universal is revealed through the particular, and it could hardly be done more plainly.

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[10] Jeffrey writes, "[w]ith regard . . . to human character, action, and feeling, we should be inclined to term everything disgusting, which represented misery, without making any appeal to our love or our admiration" (*Heritage* 92).

[11] Crabbe is not always so indirect. See such lines in "The Poor and Their Dwellings" as these, whose didacticism demands compassion from us:

The plainness is evident in the clarity and accuracy of the picture and in the brevity of the story. The brevity was achieved not in spite of the heroic couplet but because of it: rarely does prose accomplish so much in so short a space; and the couplet has the advantage of rhyme over blank verse (the last three couplets of the first paragraph are ample evidence), and of line length (which inhibits song and jingle and enables the poet a fuller treatment of his subject) and line flexibility over other stanza forms. In order to get a sense of the couplet's flexibility, consider the following adjustments to the second paragraph:

Her naked Children round
  The Alley run
And roll'd in Dust, are bronz'd
  Beneath the Sun;

Or gambol round the Dame,
  Who, loosely drest,

What venerable ruin Man appears!
How worthy Pity, Love, Respect, and Grief--
He claims Protection--he compels Relief . . . (ll. 234-36)

Wooes the coy Breeze to fan
  The open Breast:

She, once an Handmaid, strove
  By decent art
To charm her Sailor's Eye
  And touch his Heart;

Her Bosom then was veil'd
  In Kerchief clean,
And Fancy left to form
  The Charms unseen.

The only changes are to the line length and the stanza-formation; except for our being able to see the frequent tendency of the pentameter line to break down into sixes and fours, and, perhaps, an undesirable emotional emphasis in each of the last lines of stanzas 2-4, nothing is gained. What is lost is not much, for we basically still have heroic couplets. The loss, though, can be felt in the third and fourth lines of each stanza, and this is because the sense of closure in the original stanzas has been disrupted; the lines having been broken, rigidity sets in. A better sense of the couplet's flexibility, however, can be gained by noticing that the first paragraph, except for its opening couplet, can not be broken up in the way the second can. Thus, line 305 breaks down into two units of five syllables each ("By the warm Alley || and the long close Lane,—"), while the next is a six-four ("There mark the fractur'd Door || and paper'd Pane,''), followed by a more strongly distinguished six-four ("Where flags the noon-tide Air, || and as we pass,"), followed by a caesura-free line ("We fear to breathe the putrifying Mass"), and so on. The last two couplets of the paragraph, too, show the benefits of enjambment:

But fearless yonder Matron; she disdains
To sigh for Zephyrs from ambrosial Plains;
But mends her Meshes torn, and pours her Lay
All in the stifling Fervour of the Day.

Along with the previous couplet, these lines contain legitimate "music." That is, their rhythm is impressively in tune with what they say, and rhythm is complemented by the enjambment of lines with caesuras and caesura-free lines, by the sibilants in line 2, and by the inverted foot in the first position of the last line. It is not the music of a lyrical poem (though Crabbe was capable of that, too), for it does not urge us to sing; nor is it the music of Wordsworth's blank verse; it is the music of the heroic couplet.

It was his didacticism that moved Crabbe to write tales in heroic couplets.[12] Like Ben Jonson, he recognised the relative freedom that the couplet offered and scorned the sonnet:[13]

> Ah! I fear
> I cannot be a Sonneteer;
> I cannot let a single thought
> In just so many lines be wrought,
> All to the Subject fairly due;
> I cannot draw, as men a wire,
> What the strict Sonnet-rules require,
> In measure and in meaning, too. (15-22 of "The Lady's Album," CPW, III, 317-18)

Likewise, although he wrote good lyrical poems, he obviously saw the heroic couplet as the best means of accommodating his narrative and didactic interests. Lyricism, and much of the subject-matter that the Romantics brought to the lyric, was for him by the way:

> . . . I have not a sigh,
> Not one soft line for Birds who pine and die,
> When Men and Maids are dying every day;
> But here's a song, and that would seem a thing,
> Within our power—it is not hard to sing,
> For Poets all a love of Song betray. (35-40)

Several times in his prefaces Crabbe claimed that the dual end of his verse was the traditional one of teaching and pleasing. Pleasure, he presumed, might be gained from the kind of accurate description we have seen him capable of; it did not hold that pleasure was only attainable from the inherently pleasant. Likewise, to teach was to provide knowledge, and if sometimes this resulted in plain, didactic lines like these from "Blaney" (Letter XIV of *The Borough*): "Come ye! who live for Pleasure, come, behold / A Man of Pleasure when he's poor and old" (128-29), at other times the didactic urge resulted in humanly engaging scenes like that of the matron and her children. The heroic couplet, the favoured poetic means of public discourse at least since Dryden, was the best form for Crabbe's didactic purposes, for obvious reasons. As we have seen, the form also suited his narrative purposes, which Crabbe defends, on philosophical grounds, in the opening of the concluding section to "Schools" (Letter XXIV, and the last, of *The Borough*):

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[12] Lilian Haddikin and B. B. Jain deny, however, that Crabbe is a didactic poet. See Jain, *The Poetry of George Crabbe*, 49.

[13] Drummond of Hawthornden reports of Jonson: "He cursed Petrarch for redacting verses to sonnets, which he said were like the tyrant's bed, where some who were too short were racked, others too long cut short" (596).

> This let me hope, that when in public view
> I bring my Pictures, Men may feel them true;
> 'This is a Likeness,' may they all declare,
> 'And I have seen him, but I know not where:'
> For I should mourn the mischief I had done,
> If as the Likeness all would fix on One. (444-49)

Crabbe uses plain statement and speech rather than weighty philosophical language to explain his motives. But it is clear that realism is at the heart of his desire to create likenesses, or "pictures," and, moreover, that in the process of creating his mimetic pictures the particular was meant to reveal the universal.

Crabbe's didacticism did not prevent him from taking on occasion a light view of human folly. Perhaps his best works are tragic tales, chief among which are, surely, "Peter Grimes" (Letter XXII of *The Borough*) and "Edward Shore" (XI of *Tales, 1812*). But comedy is given due attention in tales like "The Frank Courtship" and "Jesse and Colin" (VI and XIII of *Tales, 1812*), and in "The Lover's Journey" (X) not only is there comic resolution, the young lovers being brought together in the end, but considerable humour as well. This latter poem provides a useful comparison—on psychological and epistemological grounds—with Wordsworth's "Lucy" poem, "Strange fits of passion have I known" (written 1799, published 1800). Wordsworth's ballad runs as follows:

> Strange fits of passion have I known:
> And I will dare to tell,
> But in the Lover's ear alone,
> What once to me befell.
>
> When she I loved looked every day
> Fresh as a rose in June,
> I to her cottage bent my way,
> Beneath an evening-moon.
>
> Upon the moon I fixed my eye,
> All over the wide lea;
> With quickening pace my horse drew nigh
> Those paths so dear to me.
>
> And now we reached the orchard-plot;
> And, as we climbed the hill,
> The sinking moon to Lucy's cot
> Came near, and nearer still.
>
> In one of those sweet dreams I slept,
> Kind Nature's gentlest boon!
> And all the while my eyes I kept
> On the descending moon.
>
> My horse moved on; hoof after hoof
> He raised, and never stopped:
> When down behind the cottage roof,
> At once, the bright moon dropped.
>
> What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
> Into a Lover's head!
> "O mercy!" to myself I cried,
> "If Lucy should be dead!" (VII in *Poetical Works* II)

The 1799 MS. has this additional stanza:

> I told her this: her laughter light
> Is ringing in my ears:
> And when I think upon that night
> My eyes are dim with tears.

The trouble with the poem, its lack of distinction—the trite language, the flatness of many of the lines—aside, is that it inadequately handles the experience described, the experience itself being perfectly legitimate subject-matter (and relatively new when Wordsworth wrote the poem). It is sentimental, in the common negative sense of that word, but is not chosen because of its obvious badness or merely to denigrate Wordsworth. The poem, in fact, is frequently anthologised; the omitted last stanza has been called "excellent poetry" by M. H. Abrams and Jack Stillinger;[14] and "completely successful" is the judgement, somewhat hesitantly made, of F. R. Leavis in *Revaluation* (202). It is the present writer's opinion that, on the contrary, the poem is a failure, but that it is sufficiently typical of Wordsworth to illustrate his subjectivism, and that the contrast it provides with Crabbe's "The Lover's Journey" is instructive.

The story that Wordsworth tells, whether or not it had a factual basis, is meant to create an atmosphere whose origins are in the poet's subjective experience. In all his narratives Crabbe says in effect, "This is a Likeness"; Wordsworth says in many of his poems, "This is what it was like for *me*," with the corollary, "Is this not what it might have been like for you?" Crabbe in "The Lover's Journey," perhaps consciously,[15] answers that question as it pertains to "Strange fits" by providing a very different understanding of basically the same situation. Perhaps the most important reason for the failure of Wordsworth's poem is evident in the first stanza. Aware of the unlikelihood of gaining sympathy from the strictly rational reader, Wordsworth attempts to restrict his audience to lovers, conventionally irrational: he seeks, oddly when one stops to think of it,[16] an exclusive audience for his private experience. He is also aware of the potential for mockery that the story offers (". . . I will dare to tell"), but presses on nevertheless. His courage is commendable if not his judgement. For in pressing on Wordsworth, as in so many of his poems, was attempting something new. He failed to realise, though, that "plain sense and sober judgment" need not involve a betrayal of, but are essential to reflection upon, subjective experiences, however intense or bizarre, and so the poem fails to give us a satisfactory understanding of the experience it describes.

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[14] See Abrams and Stillinger's note on the poem, *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (5th ed.), Vol. 2, p. 171, n. 2.

[15] The poem certainly constitutes a criticism of the Romantic imagination; it may have been directed at "Strange fits" in particular.

Common sense tells us that the subjective part of the experience was illusory, that it was caused by the overactive imagination of the lover, who eagerly anticipates, on his long, lonely journey, his nighttime rendezvous with the beloved. The situation is therefore one that calls for satire, a gentle self-mockery, the speaker being a rational man who recollects the emotion in tranquillity. That Wordsworth realised the situation's satirical possibilities is plain from the first stanza of the poem, from the lines "What fond and wayward thoughts will slide / Into a Lover's head!," and from Lucy's laughter in the omitted stanza. But, like Crabbe as it would happen,[17] Wordsworth was not comfortable with satire, an eighteenth-century specialty, and so instead we have a sincere attempt at rendering the experience, the strange fit of passion occasioned by the sudden and, it should be added, unnatural "dropping" of the moon behind Lucy's cottage, and an ominousness, a tone of awe, too serious for the occasion and at odds with the speaker's half-hearted recognition of his foolishness. We are intended to leave the poem feeling something of the speaker's fear, not knowing much about his understanding of the experience. The justification for the poem is the emotion evoked, not the understanding of the emotion; and the emotion is, significantly, only evoked in the speaker, not at all in the reader. This, perhaps, accounts for the poem's negligible descriptive value—Wordsworth's focus is clearly inward, not outward. Still, we are likely to feel that by the end of the poem there is something amiss. This is true whether it ends as published or as composed. Ending as published, the poem leaves us wondering whether we ought not to be amused by the speaker; ending as composed, it leaves us feeling that Lucy's laughter is the right response, but certainly not the speaker's weeping. For his tears are not substantiated by the occasion, though they might have been. That is, the speaker's tears are foolish: they represent an inappropriate emotional response because they are aroused not by an imagined occurrence (which would be something else), but by the *recollection* of an imagined occurrence and the emotion that accompanied it. Had Lucy turned out to be dead after all, though, or if we were informed that she died shortly thereafter (and we should not have to justify this poem by referring to other "Lucy" poems), then we might grant the tears. The poem is therefore a failure psychologically as well as stylistically, though it was obviously the psychology of the lover that most interested Wordsworth. The subjective slant accounts for the degree of respect the poem has received, but the poem itself reads almost like a first draft—there is the basis for a good poem, not the poem itself.

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[16] Imagine a poet restricting, say, a poem about anger to an audience of angry people.

[17] B. B. Jain, in *The Poetry of George Crabbe*, is probably right in saying that "Crabbe was too sincere, generous, forgiving and tolerant to assume the role of a powerful satirist" (50). See also Crabbe's *Satire*, in which he, as Jain puts it, "has logically suggested the futility of satirical poetry" (49).

That the poet might treat the lover as a conventionally irrational figure without sharing in that irrationality is illustrated by Crabbe's "The Lover's Journey." Ironically, "Strange fits" illustrates the fickleness not only of lovers but of intuition, the lover's fear having been groundless. That is, the lover's emotion was motivated by something in nature (though whether it could occur in nature is another matter): the sudden "dropping" of the moon behind Lucy's cottage, which the lover wrongly feared may have been symbolic of her death. The travelling lover of Crabbe's poem is subject to similar caprices, though nature (or, more exactly, the countryside) plays a neutral, imagistic rather than symbolic, role. Naturally, the tale is told in third person, but this alone cannot account for the height from which Crabbe views the lover. His perspective is Shakespearean (three of the four epigraphs to the tale are from Shakespeare, Crabbe's favourite source for epigraphs): having come to understand fully the wonder of romantic love and the foibles to which lovers are susceptible, Crabbe is able to present the young "Orlando" (his real name, John) on his trek to his "Laura" (Susan) with a sympathy that comes with mature intelligence. There is a distance between Crabbe—and therefore the reader—and the lover. But this distance is crossed by Crabbe's affable eye, rather than condescendingly maintained. Crabbe gives us a comic tale about youthful love; Wordsworth would appear to have sought something of the woe and wonder of tragedy for what is essentially comic material.[18]

"Strange fits," like so many of Wordsworth's poems, might have profited from the distance Crabbe maintains. Had Wordsworth not only known the foibles of lovers but been more concerned with fully understanding and judging them, he would not have made the mistake of allowing the speaker's self-indulgent reverie. (That we sometimes engage in self-indulgent reverie is of course no defense for self-indulgent reverie in poetry.) Had the speaker not been self-indulgent, his judgement of the apparently symbolic movement of the moon might have been more central to the poem. That is, he might have been made to see the situation more clearly, and this need not have changed the subjectivism essential to the poem; it simply would have made that perspective more interesting. As it stands, "Strange fits" provides good reason for saying with Aristotle that "imagination [the process of imagining] is a feeble sort of sensation" (*Rhetoric*, 1370^a, 28). Aquinas, in "Sense Knowledge and Truth," elaborates on this point in a way that has particular bearing on Wordsworth's poem and, indeed, on Romantic poetics in general:

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[18] Woe and wonder are Shakespeare's terms. See Cunningham's *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*, in *The Collected Essays*, 1-129.

> As regards the apprehension of the senses, it must be noted that there is one type of apprehensive power, for example, a proper sense, which apprehends a sensible species in the presence of a sensible thing; but there is also a second type, the imagination, for example, which apprehends a sensible species when the thing is absent. So, even though the sense always apprehends a thing as it is, unless there is an impediment in the organ or in the medium, the imagination usually apprehends a thing as it is not, since it apprehends it as present though it is absent. Consequently, the Philosopher says: "Imagination, not sense, is the master of falsity." (*The Pocket Aquinas* 21-22)

Wordsworth's imaginative approach to an objective experience (the setting of the moon) thus enshrouds that experience in the mists of subjectivism (the speaker's response to the setting of the moon). The result is that sort of mystification in which an objectively explicable "sensible species" is distorted by an imaginative response to it. Like the speaker, Wordsworth was overwhelmed by imagination; the reader need not be.

The clarity of Crabbe's perspective is impressive in comparison. Lines like the following, among the weakest in the poem, point to the dangers that legwork hold for the narrative poet:

> Fair was the morning, and the month was June
> When rose a Lover; Love awakens soon;
> Brief his repose, yet much he dreamt the while
> Of that day's meeting, and his Laura's smile . . . . (18-20)

The tale proper begins here, but Crabbe's didacticism and concern for clarity resulted in a different opening to the poem:

> It is the Soul that sees; the outward eyes
> Present the object, but the mind descries;
> And thence delight, disgust, or cool indiff'rence rise:
> When minds are joyful, then we look around,
> And what is seen is all on fairy ground;
> Again they sicken, and on every view
> Cast their own dull and melancholy hue;
> Or, if absorb'd by their peculiar cares,
> The vacant eye on viewless matter glares;
> Our feelings still upon their views attend,
> And their own natures to the objects lend;
> Sorrow and joy are in their influence sure,
> Long as the passion reigns th'effects endure;
> But Love in minds his various changes makes,
> And clothes each object with the change he takes;
> His light and shade on every view he throws,
> And on each object, what he feels, bestows. (1-17)

Again, Pound would not have liked this preface because it is a preface, it is commentary. Like all good prefaces, though, it is informative and very clear. The first two lines constitute the thesis of the poem, and do so with an epigrammatic tautness. Line 3 establishes the three basic responses that the mind might make, which are then each taken up in successive couplets. Lines 10 and 11 summarise, probably unnecessarily. The next couplet asserts the surety of the opposed feelings of sorrow and joy, and this surety contrasts with the ambivalence of love, the central emotion of the tale, which is taken up in the last two couplets of the preface.

The question remains, however, as to whether the preface is necessary. In a sense, it is not. The tale itself presents the particular actions—the evidence—upon which the general statements of the preface are based. Compared to the characteristic directness of Wordsworth's poem ("I have known strange fits of passion and I will tell you about one of them"), the four epigraphs and the preface of Crabbe's seem redundant, fussy; indeed, the directness of Romantic poetry was to some extent a response to Neo-classical extra baggage. Directness, though variously interpreted, has of course had enormous success in the twentieth century; many modernists and postmodernists having adopted it as a precept, we have become predisposed to prefer the way of Wordsworth to that of Crabbe.

Another way of putting it is to say that Wordsworth's direct approach, common in his verse, is more suited to our modern tastes because of its apparent plainness. It has the advantage of brevity, which, along with clarity, is one of the two central qualities traditionally associated with a plain style. The plainness also consists in appearing to get right down to business, though in fact the most important business of the poet—the understanding of human experience—is in the end neglected. But primarily it consists in explicitness. As J. V. Cunningham points out in "Classical and Medieval: Statius on Sleep" (*CE* 147-61), a proposition in a poem, or for that matter a whole poem, may be

> given a rhetorical treatment that removes it from the bluntness of plain statement. . . . [S]omething . . . is said by indirection than [*sic*] could have been said in the same compass by direct statement, and this something . . . requires the active participation of the reader in finding it out. The reader must actively assist in constructing the poem. (157)

Two things ought to be said about Cunningham's remarks. The first is that the rhetorical treatment that the poet gives his proposition will remove it from the *bluntness* of plain statement, but not necessarily from plainness. Thus, for example, in the first line of Jonson's "My Picture Left in Scotland," the slightest of rhetorical gestures ("I now think") modifies what appears to be the most direct of statements but is in fact a new metaphor that plays upon an old one: "I now think Love is rather deaf than blind." Hence the opening line, like the rest of the poem, is rhetorical without being ornamental, and plain without being blunt. The second thing that ought to be said is that although "the reader must actively assist in constructing the poem," he must do so without molesting it. The text must be said to exist on the page, but it most fully exists in the minds of readers who, having brought their own experiences to their reading, have come to understand it as what Cunningham describes in "The Ancient Quarrel Between History and Poetry" as "the embodiment of an intention" (*CE* 120). The plainness, then, of "Strange fits" largely consists in its explicitness, which makes for a certain "bluntness of plain statement." This, however, must be qualified, for the ballad—or any narrative poem—is to some extent *necessarily* explicit: it has a story to tell. But what might have been implicit in the poem—implicit, say, in the way that the king is presented in the opening of "Sir Patrick Spens":

> The king sits in Dunfermling toune,
>   Drinking the blude-reid wine:
> 'O whar will I get guid sailor,
>   To sail this schip of mine?' (Scott 209)

—is made explicit:

> Strange fits of passion have I known:
> And I will dare to tell,
> But in the Lover's ear alone,
> What once to me befell.
>
> . . . .
>
> What fond and wayward thoughts will slide
> Into a Lover's head!

and, in the omitted stanza:

> And when I think upon that night
> My eyes are dim with tears.

Wordsworth must tell it like it was. The explicitness, or plainness, is self-evident and relentless. This is not to say, however, that plainness is necessarily undesirable, but that directness, if not always undesirable and sometimes inescapable, has clear limitations.

Crabbe's narratives, whether because of his didacticism or because of necessary legwork, often resulted in directness, though the indirect or implicit approach of his descriptive passages is more indicative of his style. And because he wrote fairly long narratives, often opening in the leisurely, "gentlemanly" fashion of "The Lover's Journey," invariably having three or more epigraphs heading the work, his interest in brevity is difficult to detect. Thus, unlike Pope, epigrammatic moments are relatively rare in his couplets, which perhaps accounts for Roscoe's humorous remark that, compared with Pope, Crabbe is "like a cart-horse cantering after a thorough-bred" (*Heritage* 412). We rarely hear the click-click-click in Crabbe. We can still agree, though, with the anonymous reviewer in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (April, 1834) who said that in general "Crabbe's style is vigorous and correct, plain, and free from redundant epithets" (*Heritage* 328). In any case, Crabbe in his workmanlike way gives us plain narrative poems, and though a stricter attention to brevity might have done away with some of his lines, especially the prefatory ones, and satisfied our modern preference for directness and even for informality, it is well to consider the matter, as best we may, from Crabbe's eighteenth-century perspective. We might well ask about the preface beginning "The Lover's Journey," Is anything to be gained from it? The answer, surely, is yes, and what is gained is an explanation, in simple abstract language, of what we are about to encounter—in a word, clarity. Paradoxically, this explanation offers a kind of directness, though different from that of Wordsworth. In the manner of poets as far apart in time as Ben Jonson and J. V. Cunningham, Crabbe has done away with the particulars of human experience and used abstract language that speaks directly to our understanding of the general, which of course is founded upon related particulars. Directness like this is more purely intellectual, and when attained by a skilled metricist, as often by Emily Dickinson and most consistently in this century by Cunningham, it offers a precision of statement and surety of feeling that makes it a major force in English poetry, and reveals the kind of directness characteristic of Wordsworth's ballads and narrative poems as lacking in intellectual and emotional depth. Crabbe's preface makes his intention clear. It may be that it enabled Crabbe to see clearly the problem with which he wished to deal in the tale; it certainly works this way for the reader. What Crabbe loses in brevity he makes up for in clarity, so to speak. But it should be noted that brevity to the narrative poet is hardly of the same importance as it is to the writer of epistles, elegies, epigrams, lyrics, or even ballads. Brevity, though important locally in the narrative poem, almost disappears as a principle in the broad scheme, the poet focussing more on his structure, or plot. If, then, in one sense the preface is unnecessary, in another to ask the question of whether it is necessary is beside the point. It is like asking whether the prefaces and chronological tables of many a book, or the selected letters of a writer are necessary. The answer, strictly speaking, may be no; still, one would not want to do without them. Furthermore, the first three lines of the preface are of value for the clarity with which the problem of the distinction between objective and subjective experiences is seen, and the last two couplets for what they say about the role that love might take in that problem.

The structure that Crabbe came up with for illustrating the truth of the propositions in his preface is, in accordance with the principle of plainness, simple. The enrapt Orlando, eagerly anticipating his rendezvous with Laura, sees all—the barren heath, the foul-smelling fen, the poverty of a family of gipsies, and so on—in a benevolent light. When he meets not with Laura but a note saying she has gone with a friend and asking if he would ride on to meet her, Orlando's disappointment is accompanied by doubt and jealousy, and so the scenes belonging to the remainder of the outward journey, even though, as Laura assures him in her note, "[t]he way is pleasant" (213), are looked upon with a cynical, angry eye. Orlando recovers from this fit of passion, however, and the meeting of the lovers is a happy one. Being distracted by his encounter with Laura, Orlando regards the scenes on the journey homeward with indifference:

> And how affected by the view of these
> Was then *Orlando*—did they pain or please?
>
> Nor pain nor pleasure could they yield—and why?
> The mind was fill'd, was happy, and the eye
> Rov'd o'er the fleeting views, that but appear'd to die.
> (342-46)

The poem ends thirteen lines later with a triplet that echoes the one above, thus emphasising and essentially restating the thesis—"It is the Soul that sees"—and achieving an apt sense of closure.

By the end of "The Lover's Journey," one feels that the situation of the lover has, like the countryside through which he travels, been clearly seen. Crabbe combines the understanding evident in the preface with descriptive passages such as this:

> Onward he went and fiercer grew the heat,
> Dust rose in clouds before the horse's feet;
> For now he pass'd through lanes of burning sand,
> Bounds to thin crops or yet uncultur'd land;
> Where the dark poppy flourish'd on the dry
> And sterile soil, and mock'd the thin-set rye. (46-51)

Sometimes the understanding and description dwell in the same place, as when we come to the gipsies:

> Within, the Father, who from fences nigh
> Had brought the fuel for the fire's supply,
> Watch'd now the feeble blaze, and stood dejected by:
> On ragged rug, just borrow'd from the bed,
> And by the hand of coarse indulgence fed,
> In dirty patchwork negligently dress'd,
> Reclin'd the Wife, an infant at her breast;
> In her wild face some touch of grace remain'd,
> Of vigour palsied and of beauty stain'd;

> Her blood-shot eyes on her unheeding mate
> Were wrathful turn'd, and seem'd her wants to state,
> Cursing his tardy aid . . . . (166-74)

Such is Crabbe's near equivalent to the noble savage and his wife. Crabbe, hardly insensitive to the "grace" and "beauty" of the gipsy woman, has not been seduced in his encounters with gipsy women—real or imaginary—into the kind of naive idealism of which Wordsworth was often guilty. The gipsy woman is real, from her "touch of grace" to her "blood-shot eyes," and the feelings Crabbe invokes for the woman in this miniature sketch—and the predominant one is pity—are therefore solidly grounded in reality. There is no literary sleight of hand here; subject neither to the whims of Orlando nor of the Romantic poet, Crabbe sees appearances for what they are.

Crabbe's subject matter was plain because realistic; it partook of what he called "the grossness of actual being." In this he was modern: his narratives are about ordinary middle- and lower-class people in the workaday world. He was also innovative: it was, after all, the heroic couplet that he used for his narrative ends. Furthermore, it was in his nature to use a plain style for his subject matter. If sometimes that style is drab or prosaic, at others is has an affinity with that "diligent negligence" that Cicero and Jonson admired. That is, Crabbe's use of the couplet reveals him as characteristically concerned with substance over style. If, for Pope, "modest Plainness sets off sprightly Wit," for Crabbe it is essential to the presentation of his material. The structure of his poems is, like that of "The Lover's Journey," invariably simple; his syntax is at least as plain and free of inversions (though there are a number of these) as Wordsworth's; his metre and stanza form, the heroic couplet, are skilfully—with point and without strain—used in telling stories, occasionally in driving home didactic arguments in abstract language, more typically in giving full scope to Crabbe's descriptive powers, or to his sympathy for human beings; and his language—including diction and the use of figures—is also governed by the ideal of plainness. This last point, at least as regards diction, is especially noteworthy given his knowledge of biology. Like Hardy, Crabbe is one of the few great observers of nature in English poetry. Also, rather than metaphorical or, more generally, figurative poems, theirs are predominantly descriptive and expository; at its best, their language (though Hardy's is the more Anglo-Saxon) appears to be artless, is free of affectation, and, one surmises, might have satisfied Jonson, who proclaims in the *Discoveries*, "[p]ure and neat language I love, yet plain and customary" (570).

Leslie Stephen in fact claims (in *Cornhill*, 1874) that

> [i]f Pope's brilliance of style savours too much of affectation, Crabbe never manages to hit off an epigram in the whole of his poetry. The language seldom soars above the style which would be intelligible to the merest clodhopper . . . . (*Heritage* 439)

Intelligible to the clodhopper, not the language of the clodhopper; also, it is perhaps well to remember that in Crabbe's day, if not much beyond, many clodhoppers, if not the merest of them, at least knew their Bible and their Bunyan. This, discussed so well by Q. D. Leavis in her exceptional and rarely read *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932),[19] gives more credence than is often ascribed not only to Crabbe's language but even to Wordsworth's "real language of men" and interest in rustic simplicity, though as Coleridge pointed out there are problems with Wordsworth's ideas about language in poetry. Since the firm establishment—in principle if not always in fact—of democracy in the English-speaking world, there have been countless poets for whom such plain language has been of central concern, to whom the understanding and sometimes even the approval of the clodhopper has meant something, whether theoretically or truly. Crabbe's subject-matter and style both come under the general description "plain and customary," and it is significant that if the merest clodhopper were to begin reading poetry again he would not only be able to recognise Crabbe's tales as poetry but understand them. Although this is an unlikely event, it may be that Crabbe will receive attention in the next decade or so from poets and readers of poetry interested in the so-called New Narrative.[20] If so, one of the fundamental principles at work in Crabbe's poems that these new readers will encounter will be that of plainness.

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[19] See Chapter 5 of Q. D. Leavis' book. Also, in the *Biographia* Coleridge says, "[i]t is an excellent remark of Dr. Henry More's that 'a man of confined education, but of good parts, by constant reading of the Bible will naturally form a more winning and commanding rhetoric than those that are learned; the intermixture of tongues and of artificial phrases debasing *their* style'" (II, 31).

IV

> By the early summer of 1798, the volume [*Lyrical Ballads*] was being represented to Hazlitt as 'an experiment . . . to see how far the public taste would endure poetry written in a more natural and simple style than had hitherto been attempted' . . . .
>
> —Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's* Lyrical Ballads *(1798)* (9)

Much of the plainness of "Strange fits," however, is not only typical of Wordsworth's ballads but of the ballad generally, which P. W. K. Stone corroborates in *The Art of Poetry 1750-1820* (1967):

> What seems almost certain . . . is that it was the 'plain style' of the ballad which, as it led him to deny any difference between the language of poetry and prose, interested him in a poetry employing only the 'real language of men'. . . . His criteria are realism ('language which the Poet himself [has] uttered . . . or which he [has] heard uttered by those around him'); and

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[20] For a convenient collection of essays on the New Narrative, and on the so-called New Formalism, see Frederick Feirstein's *Expansive Poetry*.

> sincerity ('The earliest poets . . . generally wrote from passion excited by *real* events'). He will acknowledge no other considerations, and makes it clear that the aiming at effect hitherto thought proper in a poetic style is what he most abhors. (101)

The realism of Wordsworth's ballads is that of traditional ballads, and, rather than consisting of "the language really used by men" in "[h]umble and rustic life," consists of "incidents and situations from common life" (1850 "Preface," *Prose Works*, I, 123-25) in "language intelligible to the merest clodhopper" (*Heritage* 439). Coleridge exploded the "language really used by men" fallacy in Chapter XVII of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and condemned, brilliantly, the "humbler" poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, the young imitators of them, and the critics who dwell upon them:

> The seductive faults, the dulcia vitia of Cowley, Marini, or Darwin might reasonably be thought capable of corrupting the public judgement for half a century, and require a twenty years' war, campaign after campaign, in order to dethrone the usurper and re-establish the legitimate taste. But that a downright simpleness, under the affectation of simplicity, prosaic words in feeble metre, silly thought in childish phrases, and a preference of mean, degrading, or at best trivial associations and characters, should succeed in forming a school of imitators, a company of almost *religious* admirers, and this too among young men of ardent minds, liberal education, and not
>
> "with academic laurels unbestowed;"
>
> and that this bare and bald *counterfeit* of poetry, which is characterized as *below* criticism, should for nearly twenty years have well-nigh *engrossed* criticism, as the main, if not the only, *butt* of review, magazine, pamphlet, poem, and paragraph;—this is indeed matter of wonder! (54-55)

Nearly two hundred years after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, the critic hesitates to say aught of the humbler poems. What might be said, rephrasing Coleridge, is that the plainness is obvious and does not rescue the "silly thought" and "at best trivial associations and characters." Also, the "realism" of Wordsworth's ballads, which involves both subject-matter and style, shares with the realism of Crabbe's tales "incidents and situations from common life" described in plain language. Two things distinguish the one sort of realism from the other, and they both have to do with the problem of truth and how the poet represents it. The first is that, as was argued in the previous section, Crabbe's realism is, unlike Wordsworth's, philosophical. That is, in Crabbe's tales ideas are represented as being real, often explicitly in his expository passages, usually implicitly in his descriptive ones, or at least in those in which ideas are shown to affect the lives of human beings. Nominalism, on the other hand, is at work in Wordsworth's "wise passiveness" ("Expostulation and Reply," l. 24) and "Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health, / Truth breathed by chearfulness" ("The Tables Turned," ll. 19-20)—this despite the fact that he was passionate about certain ideas. The passion was sincere if not always defendable—which leads to the second thing that distinguishes Wordsworth's realism from Crabbe's: personal sincerity.

As the quotation from Stone suggests, Wordsworth regarded sincerity as "'passion excited by *real* events,'" and therefore linked sincerity with truth. And truth was intuitive, spontaneous:

> 'Think you, mid all this mighty sum
> 'Of things for ever speaking,
> 'That nothing of itself will come,
> 'But we must still be seeking? ("Expostulation and Reply" ll. 25-28)
>
> One impulse from the vernal wood
> May teach you more of man;
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can. ("The Tables Turned" ll. 21-24)

The poet, and anyone else in touch with the source, in communion with nature, is the conduit of truth. This has a certain obvious appeal that has spawned a myriad of poets preaching the gospel of personal conviction since the time of Wordsworth, the most eminent being Walt Whitman. This phenomenon was, of course, made possible by the subordination of reason to the imagination, and by the concomitant emphasis on "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (1850 "Preface," *Prose Works* I, 127). One reached the truth intuitively (or the truth simply reached one), and therefore the feelings were of prime importance; and one expressed the truth as it had long been expressed: plainly, simply, in "the real language of men," or in the language of conversation. Therefore spontaneity was highly valued. However, as Wesley Trimpi has remarked, "[s]pontaneity and informality"—the latter, mainly through the influence of Whitman, came to characterise the tone of the typical free-verse poem in the second half of the twentieth century—"do not necessarily reveal the truth, in the interest of which the Latin satirists had rejected rhetorical ornament, and may show the emptiness of a mind as well as its sincerity" (114). Wordsworth's mind was by no means empty, but one can see how his emphasis on intuition, feeling, and spontaneity would appeal to minds that were.[21]

The conversational style is in fact not one but many. It is the style of the classical plain style, and is known in Latin as the *sermo*. It is arguably the style, however, of Wordsworth's ballads as well as, in this century, much free verse. In prose fiction, too, it ranges from the style of *The Pilgrim's Progress* to that of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Clearly, the idea of a conversational style has an extraordinary appeal, and its possibilities are wide-ranging. To be plain was as much the motive of Bunyan, despite the allegory, as it was of Twain, whose genius for real speech was one of the triumphs of nineteenth-century American fiction, as much that of Wordsworth in his ballads as of William Carlos Williams in some of his poems, or, to take another direction, of the contemporary poet, Raymond Oliver, whose classical plain style can be found in, among other places, *To Be Plain: Translations from Greek, Latin, French, and German* (1980). The motive is essentially the same, or would appear so; the results are extraordinarily varied. Yet the task of discovering the qualities that make for each sort of plainness remains, as does that of evaluation, and of discriminating, say, the "diligent kind of negligence" from what Coleridge refers to above as "the affectation of simplicity" in *Lyrical Ballads.*

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[21] Q. D. Leavis argues that Dickens' formulaic writing contributed to the decline of the public's reading ability, and that lesser writers exploited the method. See *Fiction and the Reading Public,* especially Chapter 7, "The Disintegration of the Reading Public."

In *Ben Jonson's Poems,* Trimpi distinguishes between one sort of plainness and another in a way that is helpful in understanding Wordsworth:

> The difference between the plainness sought by the Royal Society and that of the classical plain style is that the former was a style in which the writer himself intruded as little as possible in the description of the physical world, a language as near to mathematics as possible. The classical plain style was developed to reveal the writer himself, to analyze and to portray the individual personality. The difference is not simply between philosophy and "natural philosophy," but between the methods of analysis that each subject matter imposes. The conscious exclusion of the writer's personality—even his mind, if that were possible—in the language of mathematics is directly opposed to the cultivation of the individual and psychological search for philosophic truth. (91)

A writer like Crabbe no doubt in some ways benefited from having read "natural philosophy," but his personality is evident even in his non-moralising descriptive passages, the descriptions revealing his clinical side, that aspect of his personality that revels in detail, and which is linked to his proclivity for discerning the causes of human suffering. The classicising of T. S. Eliot, too, can only in a highly qualified sense be said to attain the "impersonality" that he desired. Could anyone else have written *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*? *The Hollow Men*? *Four Quartets*? Although such poems may be said to be impersonal in not being explicitly concerned with the poet's personal life (and a great deal of effort has been put into proving that *The Waste Land,* for example, is *implicitly* personal), they surely are expressive of the poet's personality. Wordsworth was no adherent to classical models but was, in the name of sincerity, very much concerned with examining and expressing his personality in his poetry.

As mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, the five characteristics of the epistolary, or conversational, style as it was practiced by English poets in the late sixteenth and in the seventeenth century are brevity, perspicuity, simplicity, grace, and appropriateness. Simplicity, Trimpi tells us, "is necessary for candor" (64-65). The connection between these two ideals was also made by Wordsworth in his theory and practice. Hence the reputed simplicity of Wordsworth's ballads is responsible for their candour, or sincerity. This quality may not have been aspired to because of classical influences, although it is possible that Wordsworth's eighteenth-century education had some indirect bearing here; since the poet felt antipathy for the Neo-classical manner, it is more likely to have been a matter of coincidental affinity. Still, the affinity is, if paradoxically, there. Traditional ballads, as Stone suggests, were attractive to Wordsworth because of their plainness, and present a more likely literary source for the poet's vital concern for sincerity. But the poems of *Lyrical Ballads* significantly differ from traditional ballads in subject-matter. "The poems are," in W. J. B. Owen's words, "concerned to trace the persistence of essentially normal states of mind in situations of emotional stress or even of mental derangement" (*LB* xxxi). In other words, many of Wordsworth's poems are concerned with unusual states of mind. This subject-matter was, however, common fare by the 1790s, and it is no coincidence that, as Yvor Winters puts it, "we have a rather large number of madmen and near madmen among literary men of established reputation from the middle of the eighteenth century onward and few or none before that time" (*IDR* 599).[22] Owen looks for "a distinction between such verse" as the magazines churned out throughout the 1790s "and Wordsworth's," and finds it "in a superiority of insight, in a deeper understanding of the subject than is usually to be found in the contributors to the magazines. . . . Wordsworth is not concerned to pity so much as to understand" (*LB* xxx). It is difficult to reconcile this last view, however, with poems like "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," "The Thorn," "The Mad Mother," and "The Convict" (one poem Owen admits is sentimental). It may be true that Wordsworth was more interested in understanding the mind under stress or suffering from madness, but the poems that treat such conditions offer little or nothing of actual understanding in the full sense of the term. For that, we would be better advised to turn to Crabbe's "Edward Shore" or "The Clerk," or any number of poems or sketches from *The Borough* and *Tales, 1812*. In any case, one thing Wordsworth wanted to be candid, or sincere, about was unusual states of mind. His psychological interests led to a concentration on the particular state of mind—that is, on the individual or personal experience. And the ballad appealed to him because it tells a story, often about simple folk. It is lyrical (in the true sense of the word), it is removed from the Neo-classical manner, and it is plain.

There is a connection between Wordsworth's ballad practice and his blank verse that will be discussed shortly. But first, there are other terms of disapprobation—the first having been "the affectation of simplicity"—that

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[22] Robert Pinsky, in an agreeable conversational style, discusses madness in general and Winters' observation on the madness of poets in particular in his poem "Essay On Psychiatrists," pp. 55-74 of *Sadness and Happiness*. Section XX takes up Winters' observation and ends:

As far as he was concerned
Suffering was life's penalty; wisdom armed one
Against madness; speech was temporary; poetry was truth. (73)

Coleridge used to describe Wordsworth's plainness, or attempted plainness. The first "defect" of Wordsworth's style that he discusses in Chapter XXII of the *Biographia* is "inconstancy of style":

> Under this name I refer to the sudden and unprepared transitions from lines or sentences of peculiar felicity (at all events striking and original) to a style, not only unimpassioned but undistinguished. He sinks too often and too abruptly to that style, which I should place in the second division of language, dividing it into the three species; first, that which is peculiar to poetry; second, that which is only proper in prose; and third, the neutral or common to both. (97)

Coleridge offers examples of the inconstancy (99-100), to which might be added these lines from *The Prelude* :

> I am sad
> At the thought of *raptures now for ever flown* ;
> Almost to tears I sometimes could be sad
> To think of, to read over, many a page,
> Poems withal of name, which at that time
> Did never fail to *entrance* me, and are now
> *Dead in my eyes, dead as a theatre*
> *Fresh emptied of spectators.* (1850, V, 545-52)

The italicised words and lines indicate what Coleridge would likely have termed "poetic," and which in any case stand out from the clearly "prosaic" bulk of the passage. The term "prosaic" is used here in Coleridge's sense as quoted above; in other words, the unitalicised lines are prosaic not because they are expository but because they are flat, tedious, and, to use Cunningham's term, explicit. It is important to point out, however, that these lines are "plainer" than the italicised parts of the passage only in a qualified, negative sense. For, the Romantic implications of "raptures" and "entrance" aside, the entire passage is plain.

But one often comes across prosaic passages in *The Prelude* that are *not* "sudden and unprepared transitions." The "I am sad" passage, indeed, is preceded by a one-sentence paragraph beginning, "Relinquishing this lofty eminence / For ground, though humbler, not the less a tract / Of the same isthmus . . ." (534-36). Many of the prosaic passages are, like those of Crabbe, the legwork of the narrative poet, but differ from those of Crabbe, and also from the prosaicness of the "I am sad" passage, in being marked by the affectation of sublimity:

> One end at least hath been attained; my mind
> Hath been revived, and if this genial mood
> Desert me not, forthwith shall be brought down
> Through later years the story of my life.
> The road lies plain before me;—'tis a theme
> Single and of determined bounds; and hence
> I choose it rather at this time, than work
> Of ampler or more varied argument,
> Where I might be discomfited and lost:
> And certain hopes are with me, that to thee
> This labour will be welcome, honoured Friend! (I, 637-47)

There are, of course, more striking instances of this affectation in *The Prelude.* This one has the residue of the affectation and is characteristic of Wordsworth's plain, conventional blank verse. As the editors of the Norton edition of *The Prelude* comment: "Wordsworth's concluding verse-paragraph . . . states plainly to Coleridge why it is that he chooses to shelve the philosophical section of *The Recluse* in order to write an extended autobiography . . . " (64, n. 9). But the plainness is qualified, if only slightly here, by the essential egocentricity, which works in conjunction with the blank verse to give us a feeling of the sublime, a feeling of the importance and nobility of what is said, without sublimity itself.

In affecting the sublime Wordsworth was attempting to raise the plain to the elevation of the grand. Crabbe managed to put the heroic couplet to a new task in making it treat the humble as humble, but Wordsworth's contrary attempt in blank verse accrues to a certain falseness:

> Ye lowly cottages wherein we dwelt,
> A ministration of your own was yours;
> Can I forget you, being as you were
> So beautiful among the pleasant fields
> In which ye stood? or can I here forget
> The plain and seemly countenance with which
> Ye dealt out your plain comforts? Yet had ye

> Delights and exultations of your own.
> Eager and never weary we pursued
> Our home-amusements by the warm peat-fire
> At evening, when with pencil, and smooth slate
> In square divisions parcelled out and all
> With crosses and with cyphers scribbled o'er,
> We schemed and puzzled, head opposed to head
> In strife too humble to be named in verse . . . . (I, 499-513)

But some things—"lowly cottages," for example—are not too humble if given the right sort of treatment. The plainness of humble life is a recurring theme in *The Prelude*, and plainness vies with grandness in the style of the poem, often being overwhelmed by it, but at times holding its own:

> Youth should be awed, religiously possessed
> With a conviction of the power that waits
> On knowledge, when sincerely sought and prized
> For its own sake, on glory and on praise
> If but by labour won, and fit to endure.
> The passing day should learn to put aside
> Her trappings here, should strip them off abashed
> Before antiquity and stedfast truth
> And strong book-mindedness; and over all
> A healthy sound simplicity should reign,
> A seemly plainness, name it what you will,
> Republican or pious. (III, 390-401)

The rhetoric—excepting "religiously possessed"—is at a low key. There are two prosaisms that would likely have annoyed Coleridge ("For its own sake" and "name it what you will"), and the whole has a prosaic ring. The passage is of course didactic, but that in itself is not a problem. The problems are, first, the explicitness, and second, the lack of argument: "Youth should be awed," "The passing day should learn," "A healthy sound simplicity should reign"—all for no other reason than that Wordsworth says so. The propositions are not likely to meet much opposition, but that does not alter the fact that they are plainly—in the full sense of the term—founded on nothing other than personal conviction. Thus the rhetoric has to be at a low key; the relative plainness is essential to the argument, such as it is.

It ought not to be assumed that all of the relatively plain passages in *The Prelude* are subject to Coleridge's charge of inconstancy. Some, in fact, from what he says of the "neutral style," Coleridge might be expected to approve. Others, however, would probably come under his term "*matter-of-factness*," which he coined to describe the "second defect" of Wordsworth's poetry, and which might be placed under the general heading, "prosaic":

> This may be divided into, *first*, a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects, and their positions, as they appeared to the poet himself; *secondly*, the insertion of accidental circumstances, in order to the full explanation of his living characters, their dispositions and actions; which circumstances might be necessary to establish the probability of a statement in real life, where nothing is taken for granted by the hearer; but appear superfluous in poetry, where the reader is willing to believe for his own sake. (101)

This sort of "realistic" presentation, close to the hearts of many postmodernists, comes from an intense concern for private experience (it is not far from solipsism), from the belief that the truth resides in "telling it like it was." The actual experience of the poet, or whomever he writes about, insofar as it can be expressed in words, is deemed essential. But, ironically, the actual essence of the experience, the extracted understanding of it, is neglected. The intense involvement with personal experience is undoubtedly responsible for such memorable moments in *The Prelude* as the description of the water in the scene of the stolen boat (I, 357 ff.) and the ice-skating scene (I,425 ff.)—that they can be called scenes is significant—and is an important factor in much modern poetry, especially in the imagistic manner. But it is also responsible for tedious details:

> . . . 'twas a day
> Tempestuous, dark, and wild, and on the grass
> I sate half-sheltered by a naked wall;
> Upon my right hand couched a single sheep,
> Upon my left a blasted hawthorn stood . . . . (XII, 297-301)

These lines illustrate the first of Coleridge's two divisions of matter-of-factness. They go some way toward "setting the mood"—however desirable that is—but only superficially. The second division is evident in the following lines, although the "living character" is Wordsworth himself:

> Content and not unwilling now to give
> A respite to this passion, I paced on
> With brisk and eager steps; and came, at length,
> To a green shady place, where down I sate
> Beneath a tree, slackening my thoughts by choice,
> And settling into gentler happiness.
> 'Twas autumn, and a clear and placid day,
> With warmth, as much as needed, from a sun
> Two hours declined towards the west; a day
> With silver clouds, and sunshine on the grass,
> And in the sheltered and the sheltering grove
> A perfect stillness. Many were the thoughts
> Encouraged and dismissed, till choice was made
> Of a known Vale, whither my feet should turn,
> Nor rest till they had reached the very door
> Of the one cottage which methought I saw. (I, 59-74)

The 1805 version of the last few lines is instructive:

> On the ground I lay
> Passing through many thoughts, yet mainly such
> As to myself pertained. I made a choice
> Of one sweet vale . . . . (79-82)

Such passages are justified time and again by Wordsworth in these terms:

> And here, O Friend! have I retraced my life
> Up to an eminence, and told a tale
> Of matters which not falsely may be called
> The glory of my youth. Of genius, power,
> Creation and divinity itself
> I have been speaking, for my theme has been
> What passed within me. (III, 170-76)

We have taken our cue from Wordsworth. The only reason for having any regard for passages such as these is that they were written by Wordsworth; they tell us something of the man and his poetics, and can be seen to relate to subsequent developments in poetry. For there is a historical link between postmodern poetics and Wordsworth's matter-of-factness, whether it consists of "a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects, and their positions, as they appeared to the poet himself," or of "the insertion of accidental circumstances, in order to the full explanation of his living characters, their dispositions and actions." Crabbe, we have seen, is matter-of-fact in the first way, though the objects described are seen by his characters, not by the poet himself, and the descriptions are almost never as general as Wordsworth's usually are. There is an obvious connection between these poets and a poet like Hardy, whose descriptions of the natural world have a like "minuteness and fidelity" (and, in quality, rank with Crabbe's) but, in poems like "Neutral Tones" and "The Darkling Thrush," transcend matter-of-factness by attaining a resonant symbolism. The preoccupation with "accidental circumstances," on the other hand, is evident in Charles Olson's famous retention of a typographical error in a poem that he was composing on the typewriter, and is central to a postmodernist like Frank O'Hara, who—most successfully in "The Day Lady Died"—relished in the accidental apparently for its own sake but also to contrast with, or at least emphasise, the singularity of personal experience.

Coleridge draws a stylistic connection between Samuel Daniel, contemporary with Shakespeare, and Wordsworth. Of Daniel he says:

> This poet's well-merited epithet is that of the "*well-languaged Daniel*;" but likewise, and by the consent of his contemporaries no less than of all succeeding critics, the "prosaic Daniel." Yet those, who thus designate this wise and amiable writer, from the frequent incorrespondency of his diction to his metre in the majority of his compositions, not only deem them valuable and interesting on other accounts; but willingly admit, that there are to be found throughout his poems, and especially in his *Epistles* and in his *Hymen's Triumph*, many and exquisite specimens of that style which, as the *neutral ground* of prose and verse, is common to both. (61)

Listing the excellences of Wordsworth in Chapter XXII of the *Biographia*, Coleridge draws the connection with Daniel:

> Both in respect of this ["a correspondent weight and sanity of the Thoughts and Sentiments"] and of the former excellence ["an austere purity of language both grammatically and logically"], Mr. Wordsworth strikingly resembles Samuel Daniel, one of the golden writers of our golden Elizabethan age, now most causelessly neglected: Samuel Daniel, whose diction bears no mark of time, no distinction of age, which has been, and as long as our language shall last, will be so far the language of the to-day and for ever, as that it is more intelligible to us, than the transitory fashions of our own particular age. A similar praise is due to his sentiments. (118, 115, 119-20)

Wordsworth, however, is a more difficult because greater poet:

> If Mr. Wordsworth is not equally with Daniel alike intelligible to all readers of average understanding in all passages of his works, the comparative difficulty does not arise from the greater impurity of the ore, but from the nature and uses of the metal. (120)

Coleridge offers no quotations from Wordsworth to illustrate the connection, but he implies that even the "Ode: Intimations of Immortalilty from Recollections of Early Childhood" suits, adding that it

> was intended for such readers only as had been accustomed to watch the flux and reflux of their inmost nature, to venture at times into the twilight realms of consciousness, and to feel a deep interest in modes of inmost being, to which they know that the attributes of time and space are inapplicable and alien, but which yet can not be conveyed save in symbols of time and space. For such readers the sense is sufficiently plain . . . . (120)

The sense is plain because such readers, supposedly, intuit the poet's meaning—they not only understand it, they believe (or "know") it to be in some way true. But it is also plain because of the style. The epigraph (from the poet's "My Heart Leaps Up") prefixed to the poem is perhaps in Coleridge's "neutral style," and the first canto combines a heightened, golden rhetoric (lines 1, 4, and 5) with a firm and essential, prosic sort of plainness:

The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

I

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,

> To me did seem
> Appareled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.
> It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
> Turn whereso'er I may,
> By night or day,
> The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Passages from *The Prelude*, too, like the one quoted above beginning, "Youth should be awed, religiously possessed" (pp. 53-54), fit the description of the "neutral style." The hallmark of this style is "an austere purity of language," or as Ben Jonson might say, "custom of speech," and its plainness is, paradoxically, the sugar-coating of Wordsworth's metaphysical pill—not that it sweetens it, but that it makes it appear more reasonable, to some more palatable, than it in fact is.

We have seen then that plainness characterises Wordsworth's style in both its "defects" and "excellences" as described by Coleridge. Some ways in which manifestations of Wordsworth's plainness resemble modern developments have been suggested. There is also, however, a crucial prosodic link between Wordsworth and the classical plain style mastered by Jonson and practiced by the Tribe of Ben. This link is not one of influence nor even of affinity, but rather of historical accident. Nevertheless, it gives meaning to the often vaguely used term "the tradition," and it illustrates one way in which the principle of plainness is a part of our tradition. The effect produced by this prosodic link is the sense of reasonableness mentioned above. William Bowman Piper, in his valuable and enterprising study *The Heroic Couplet* (1969), explains how Jonson's couplets embodied reason, and how that embodiment began to shift after his time:

> In Jonson's longer poems one often finds enjambed couplets—couplets that flow together in what J. V. Cunningham has described as a noticeably unnoticeable way. Since the persistent cause of these fundamental modifications in couplet flow is the shape and flow of reasonable argument—of antitheses, equations,

> distinctions, evidence, inferences—Jonson's couplet poetry emanates as a discourse of reason. *The shape of reason, Jonson's couplet practice persistently implies, is more important than the shape of the couplet.*
>
> Most of the age following Jonson . . . agreed with him that couplets were the bravest sort of verses, but its poets were unable to emulate him in his flexible and reasonable handling of them. Englishmen after 1640 required a greater fixity, a stricter adherence to unquestioned principles than Jonson's reasonable utterance could project. They practiced a more strictly closed form of couplet, projected more stiffly held opinions—*opinions rather than reasons*—and addressed a narrower society than the company of reasonable men one joins in the tribe of Ben. (67-69, italics added)

By the middle of the eighteenth century the "shape of reason" had decayed; the "shape of the couplet" had become paramount. Thus meaning (including thought and feeling) was subordinated to form, and Wordsworth regarded the artificiality of this situation as insincere. Thus he said that "Pope . . . wrote epitaphs not 'as a plain Man' but 'as a metrical Wit'" (Owen, *WC* 127). The way out of this situation was to return to meaning as primary, but because reason had decayed there was an understandable emphasis on emotion. Again, because of the decline of reason and reasonableness and the sense that Jonson and Dryden and Pope had of writing to a public that could be expected to share the poet's judgements immediately, the poet's opinions became a basis for the validity of his work, which now was directed not at the construction of rational arguments, but the shaping of the imagination. Whether or not Wordsworth *had* to reject the heroic couplet is academic; why he did so is what is important. It is widely, and correctly, believed that he did so for the sake of freedom; he would break the "fixity" Piper mentions. The emphasis, however, should not be on freedom from the heroic couplet (which is arguably, if ironically, a freer form than blank verse[23]) but on freedom to concentrate on meaning, which he understood as *necessarily* involving the rejection of the couplet.

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[23] The heroic couplet obviously restricts the poet insofar as he must write in rhymed pentameters, but rhyme has the advantage over blank verse of enabling the poet greater

Freedom of thought and expression was not confused with the demands of form by a great practitioner of the heroic couplet like Dryden, who writes in *Religio Laici* (1682), "Shall I speak plain and, in a nation free, / Assume an honest laymen's liberty?" (316-17), and in the last lines of that poem recognises his style's proximity to prose:

> Thus have I made my opinions clear:
> Yet neither praise expect nor censure fear;
> And this unpolish'd, rugged verse I chose,
> As fittest for discourse and nearest prose;
> For while from sacred truth I do not swerve,
> Tom Sternhold's or Tom Shadwell's rhymes will serve.
> (451-56)

The word "opinions" in the first line is fortuitous, given what Piper says about the use of the couplet after 1640. Plainness has been associated with freedom (religious and political, traditionally; in our time it extends to sexual freedom) at least since Dryden's time. In terms of prosody, however, this association was implicit in the development of the classical plain style. Whereas Donne and Jonson sought freedom from the formulaic methods of the Petrarchans and of the native plain stylists, Wordsworth sought freedom from the form of the eighteenth-century heroic couplet. But, again, for each of these poets the primary thing was the freedom *to*, not the freedom *from*. It is significant, though, that Wordsworth took the way of blank verse, which is "nearer prose" than the heroic couplet, if in Wordsworth's hands it is not "unpolish'd, rugged verse" nor "fittest for discourse."

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emphasis, and the controlled run-over couplet has the advantage over the closed couplet norm of greater variance in degree of pause at the couplet's close.

"Because of the decline of reason and the success of Shaftesburyan inspiration,[24] Wordsworth's blank verse, as we have seen, usually takes the shape of reverie (if often of a high-blown variety) rather than rational discourse. Coleridge, in a fascinating passage in the *Biographia* quotes "the judicious and amiable [Christian] GARVE" on the conversational style of Christian Furchtegott Gellert (1715-1789):

> "It was a strange and curious phenomenon, and such as in Germany had been previously unheard of, to read verses in which everything was expressed just as one would wish to talk, and yet all dignified, attractive, and interesting; and all at the same time perfectly correct as to the measure of the syllables and the rhyme. It is certain, that poetry when it has attained this excellence makes a far greater impression than prose. So much so indeed, that even the gratification which the very rhymes afford, becomes then no longer a contemptible or trifling gratification." (II, 70)

Though hardly a complete description, this fits the classical plain style, what Cunningham calls the "noticeably unnoticeable style" (322). This style, the greatest of the Renaissance, appeared in English at a time when, as Morris Croll informs us, Latin and the vernacular languages "were present in the minds of most well-educated people in relations of almost exact balance and equality, and there were no real differences whatever between the uses of the one and the other" (Cunningham, *The Problem of Style*, 157-58). The language of this style is the custom of the learned; it is "as one *would wish* to talk," not as one ordinarily talks (which is the basis for much conversational free verse). That Wordsworth aimed at a conversational style, in which, Coleridge insists, "our language is, and from the first dawn of poetry ever has been, particularly rich" (II, 71), may strike the reader of either *Lyrical Ballads* or *The Prelude* as odd. It certainly seemed odd to Coleridge:

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[24] See Winters, *In Defense of Reason* 449, and *Forms of Discovery* 147-48.

> To me it will always remain a singular and noticeable fact; that a theory which would establish this *lingua communis*, not only as the best, but as the only commendable style, should have proceeded from a poet, whose diction, next to that of Shakespeare and Milton, appears to me of all others the most *individualized* and characteristic. (II, 77)

Yet some of Wordsworth's most successful poems, including "The Ruined Cottage" (1797-99), "Michael" (1800), and "The Brothers" (1800), which begins,

> "THESE Tourists, heaven preserve us! needs must live
> A profitable life: some glance along
> Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,
> And they were butterflies to wheel about
> Long as the summer lasted . . . ,"

do illustrate a serviceable conversational style. Moreover, although his blank verse is "individualized" in that he worked the medium to his own purposes, Wordsworth still received the basic elements of the form from the tradition, specifically from Milton.

The style of *Paradise Regained*, which Wordsworth thought "the most perfect *in execution* of anything written by Milton" (*PR*, note*, 6), has long been recognised as plain, and the speeches of Jesus plainer than those of Satan.[25] The simplest reason for this is perhaps the most important—that Milton is concerned to reveal the truth. Plainness is also something of a theme in the poem, and if this narrative passage is not of the plainest, it certainly anticipates Wordsworth in style and subject:

> Then on the bank of Jordan, by a creek,
> Where winds with reeds and osiers whispering play,
> Plain fishermen (no greater men them call),
> Close in a cottage low together got,
> Their unexpected loss and plaints outbreathed . . . . (II, 25-29)

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[25] On the plainness of *Paradise Regained* and of Milton's style, see James Holly Hanford, *A Milton Handbook*, Chapters 5 and 6. See also Edward R. Weismiller's "Studies of Style and Verse Form in *Paradise Regained*," in Walter MacKellar's *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton*, Vol. 4, 253-363.

Jesus, of course, appears to stretch the truth when, on plain grounds, he defends Hebrew teachings, claiming "Greece from us these arts derived" (IV, 338), and concluding:

> "Their orators thou then extoll'st as those
> The top of eloquence—statists indeed,
> And lovers of their country, as may seem;
> But herein to our Prophets far beneath,
> As men divinely taught, and better teaching
> The solid rules of civil government,
> In their majestic, unaffected style,
> Than all the oratory of Greece and Rome.
> In them is plainest taught, and easiest learnt,
> What makes a nation happy, and keeps it so,
> What ruins kingdoms, and lays cities flat;
> These only, with our Law, best form a king." (IV, 353-64)

In his blank verse, Wordsworth, as much as Milton in *Paradise Regained*, sought a "majestic, unaffected style" that would make plain not Jesus's but *his* teachings. That the style is sometimes affected marks the failure to realise an intention.

Piper comments briefly on an important prosodic link between Jonson and Milton:

> Carew, Herrick, and other members of the tribe of Ben maintained this style of couplet he had inaugurated, subordinating the mechanics of the form to the flow of sense and argument, and infusing that flow with the accents of public conversation. . . . But there is no continuance in the use of the couplet to create a climate of unhampered conversational reasoning after the disappearance of the tribe of Ben. When this subordination of mechanical form to the flow of mind that Jonson had achieved escaped the scrutiny of public conversation—that is, when the poet came to settle for a fit audience though few—and when it also escaped the definitions of rhyme, it became, as Professor Trimpi has suggested, the metrical manner of *Paradise Lost*; in the process, of course, it also escaped the bounds of our history. (68)

Trimpi's argument, in *Ben Jonson's Poems*, opens:

> The application of the rhetorical principles of the classical plain style to English versification is most easily documented in the work of Jonson. These principles, however, are not restricted to English poems in the classical plain style; they become

> principles of good prosody in various styles, although they seem to have come into the language mainly under the sanction of Jonson and Donne in the 1590's. In order to show the extent of these principles in the seventeenth century, I shall quote a poem of Jonson's in the restrained rhythm of the relatively closed couplet ["To Heaven"] and then a passage of Milton's blank verse [*Paradise Lost* II 40-55], the sources of whose rhythm have been sought for in strange places and reconstructed of strange material. The suggestion that Milton's elevated blank verse owes its most fundamental rhythmical principles to those of the plainest of styles, expanded in accord with certain conventions of diction and phrase demanded by the decorum of the high style, need not appear strange in comparison. (129-30)

The principles Trimpi refers to are rhythmical:

> The two rhythmical principles introduced most explicitly into English by the classical plain style are revealed in these several sequences [indicating caesural placement]. No recurring pattern of caesural placement appears, and the caesura is free to fall in any position in the line, odd or even. If one holds a magnifying glass, so to speak, over Jonson's lines and imagines the number of syllables greatly increased between the commas, the run-overs correspondingly more frequent, and the periods greatly lengthened, one will see the essential structure of Miltonic blank verse. The principle of the caesural unit's cutting across the rhythmical unit of the line is the same, but the unit is much larger. (131)

The "flow of the mind" that Piper speaks of was attainable through these rhythmical principles; in Trimpi's terms, syntax determines the rhythmical structure:

> I should say here that I am not suggesting that *Paradise Lost* is in the plain style or that Milton derived his blank verse from Jonson's couplet. I am suggesting that the origin of the two most fundamental variations in the rhythm of his blank verse, as in any verse after Jonson, can best be accounted for historically by the adaptation of the *sermo* to the English line. What is true of all classical versification to a greater or less extent—that the rhythmical structure is determined by syntax rather than by an arbitrarily imposed rhythmical unit of a line of given length—most logically would enter the language through a rhetorical position dedicated to idiomatic flexibility. (132)

It might be added that although *Paradise Lost* is not in the plain style, parts of it are plainer than others, and that whatever plainness the poem achieves is due to figurative control (or a lack of figures), a purity of diction, and the language having a prose—or at least an unstrained—order. Such a situation predominates in this passage from God's somewhat defensive defense of the fall:

> . . . whose fault?
> Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee
> All he could have; I made him just and right,
> Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
> Such I created all th' Eternal Powers
> And Spirits, both them who stood and them who fail'd;
> Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
> Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
> Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
> Where only what they needs must do, appear'd
> Not what they would? what praise could they receive?
> . . . .
> They therefore as to right belong'd,
> So were created, nor can justly accuse
> Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate;
> As if Predestination over-rul'd
> Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree
> Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
> Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
> Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
> Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown.
> So without least impulses or shadow of Fate,
> Or aught by me immutably foreseen,
> They trespass, Authors to themselves in all
> Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
> I form'd them free, and free they must remain,
> Till they enthrall themselves: I else must change
> Thir nature, and revoke the high Decree
> Unchangeable, Eternal, which ordain'd
> Thir freedom: they themselves ordain'd thir fall. (III 96-106; 111-28)

The speaker could not, of course, be more exalted, the passage, however, is not grand but, in keeping with the plain style's purpose to speak the truth, relatively plain. As well as illustrating the occasional plainness of *Paradise Lost*, the passage illustrates Milton's free-ranging caesura—"the rhythmical structure is determined by syntax rather than by an arbitrarily imposed rhythmical unit of a line of given length." When the rhythmical principles central to the classical plain style work in conjunction with the kind of plain language (including syntax, diction, and figure) evident above, there is little separating the style of Jonson from that of Milton. Without doing violence to the distinctiveness of their styles and subject matter, much the same can be said of Jonson and Wordsworth. The principle that pulls them toward one another is that of plainness.

The rhythmical principles bequeathed by the *sermo* to Jonson's couplet and Milton's blank verse owe their existence to the poet's primary concern for his argument, and, when combined with a purity of diction and of syntax, they result in what Trimpi calls idiomatic purity in poetry.[26] This quality is identical with the "idiomatic flexibility" mentioned by Trimpi, and because it results in a "fashionless style" (Trimpi 186) it gives us a sense not only that we are in good hands but that our poet could make poetry out of anything—all subjects and all ranges of thought and feeling appear to be open to him. He has found, because of the flexibility of his medium, a central position from which to view the world, and so he enjoys the greatest possible freedom within form. And if he works in the heroic couplet he will have, potentially, the greatest possible flexibility, for his argument might, as it were, underplay rhyme by means of enjambment, which can be realized to varying degrees, or emphasise it by means of pause, again in varying degrees. The freedom that this gives the poet is—paradoxically—virtually the same as that which gave rise to free verse: idiomatic purity is as much a goal of Jonson as of William Carlos Williams or Ezra Pound. Blank verse can be seen, then, as a kind of intermediary stage, though of course it was developed—for dramatic purposes—at about the same time as Jonson's couplet. But when Wordsworth gets hold of the flexible form of Miltonic blank verse and uses it for the purpose of self-expression, we have come about half-way down the road from Jonson's couplet to Williams' controlled free verse.

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[26] Trimpi distinguishes idiomatic purity in poetry from idiomatic purity in prose as involving rhythm as well as diction and syntax, whereas in prose "the effects of rhythm, though important, are insufficiently restricted and measurable, except in cases of idiosyncrasy, to support the distinction between pure and impure" (121-22).

The celebrated simplicity of Wordsworth's blank verse, then, owes as much to the rhythmical principles of the classical plain style as to Wordsworth's concern for the simple life and plain language:

> From his native hills
> He wandered far; much did he seek of men,
> Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,
> Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those
> Essential and eternal in the heart,
> That, 'mid the simpler forms of rural life,
> Exist more simple in their elements,
> And speak a plainer language. (*The Excursion* I, 340-47)

The reasonableness of this passage is due to the simplicity, and the simplicity consists of the reverence for the simple life expressed by the flow of the mind through plain language. That we tend to run over the flaws (the lack of economy in the "did" of the second line and in the repetition of "their") of such passages in Wordsworth is indicative of our being swept along with the flow, and this has its danger. Coleridge, with Wordsworth's example in mind, speaks of having defended, as a young man, "lines running into each other, instead of closing at each couplet, and of natural language, neither bookish, nor vulgar, neither redolent of the lamp, nor of the kennel" (I, 13-14); Milton, too, speaks of "the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another" in his note prefacing *Paradise Lost* (4); and, as was established early in this chapter (see page 23), Jonson spoke of couplets being "the bravest sort of verses, especially when they are broken, like hexameters." Such lines, when marked by plain language, give the sense of a plain man speaking plainly. If they are commonly used by Wordsworth, as by Milton, to satisfy the ends of the grand style,[27] they are often used in relatively plain passages, and to fulfil the office of the plain style (that is, to tell the truth), or at least they have that intention.

This brings us to the danger referred to above, and which F. R. Leavis responds to in *Revaluation* (1936):

> What does seem worth insisting on is the felicitous accuracy (unconscious, no doubt) of Arnold's word when he says that the 'philosophy' is an illusion.
>
> For Wordsworth's 'philosophy' certainly appears, as such, to invite discussion, and there is a general belief that we all know, or could know by re-reading *The Prelude*, what his doctrines concerning the growth of the mind and relation of Man to Nature are. His philosophic verse has a convincingly expository tone and manner, and it is difficult not to believe, after reading, say, Book II of *The Prelude*, that one has been reading a paraphrasable argument—difficult not to believe, though the paraphrase, if resolutely attempted, would turn out to be impossible. (155)

In other words, Wordsworth created the feel of a defendable argument without taking the trouble to provide the argument itself. As Donald Davie nicely puts it in *Articulate Energy* (1955), "this is poetry where the syntax counts enormously, counts for nearly everything" (111), but the syntax does not lead to resolution, as Leavis points out:

> Even if there were not so much poetry to hold the mind in a subtly incompatible mode of attention, it would still be difficult to continue attending to the philosophic argument, because of the way in which the verse, evenly meditative in tone and movement, goes on and on, without dialectical suspense and crisis or rise and fall. By an innocently insidious trick Wordsworth, in this calm ruminative progression, will appear to be preoccupied with a judicial weighing of alternative possibilities, while actually making it more difficult to check the argument from which he will emerge, as it were inevitably, with a far from inevitable conclusion. (162)

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[27] As Trimpi says, "[t]he requirements of decorum of the high style in matters of diction, phrasing, figures, and types of statement need in no sense be incompatible with these principles of rhythm" (132).

Again, as Davie says, the "movement" that "goes on and on" "is as much a movement of syntax, a movement of the mind, as it is a movement in the ear" (112). The trick is insidious because in communing "With things that really are" Wordsworth lay claim to the truth, and the apparent plainness of the "calm ruminative progression" works—or would work—so as to persuade the reader that the truth has been found, and that his own intuitive faculties can likewise lead him there. Hence Wordsworth appears to make plain (despite the occasional Miltonic rhetoric)

> Arguments sent from Heaven to prove the cause
> Good, pure, which no one could stand up against,
> Who was not lost, abandoned, selfish, proud,
> Mean, miserable, wilfully depraved,
> Hater perverse of equity and truth. (IX, 283-87)

It would seem that what Wordsworth says of nature we are urged to say of *The Prelude* (or would have been urged to say of *The Recluse*):

> With such a book
> Before our eyes, we could not choose but read
> Lessons of genuine brotherhood, the plain
> And universal reason of mankind,
> The truths of young and old. (VI, 543-47)

Thus Wordsworth defends the turning from his books, which he mentions earlier in Book Sixth. Aristotle, too, could read lessons from nature, and derive rules from those lessons, but his or any wary mind would not have fallen for Wordsworth's "innocently insidious" exalted schoolboy's excuse for leaving Cambridge:

> The bonds of indolent society
> Relaxing in their hold, henceforth I lived
> More to myself. Two winters may be passed
> Without a separate notice: many books
> Were skimmed, devoured, or studiously perused,
> But with no settled plan. I was detached
> Internally from academic cares;
> Yet independent study seemed a course
> Of hardy disobedience toward friends
> And kindred, proud rebellion and unkind.
> This spurious virtue, rather let it bear

A name it more deserves, this cowardice,
Gave treacherous sanction to that over-love
Of freedom which encouraged me to turn
From regulations even of my own
As from restraints and bonds. Yet who can tell—
Who knows what thus may have been gained, both then
And at a later season, or preserved;
What love of nature, what original strength
Of contemplation, what intuitive truths,
The deepest and the best, what keen research,
Unbiased, unbewildered, and unawed?

The Poet's soul was with me at that time . . . . (VI, 20-42)

And, so interpreted, it has been with us ever since. The explanation for the situation related in the verse-paragraph comes in the last line quoted. The sense of a judicious mind having led as it were inevitably to this explanation is brought about by the plainness of the diction, the apparent frankness of the revelation, and, perhaps especially, by the conversational quality of the syntax. The effect is to make us object to the certainly too harsh word "cowardice," defend Wordsworth's "over-love / Of freedom" against himself, and endorse the "intuitive truths" and the concomitant definition of "Poet"—that is, if we allow the innocent insidiousness to overwhelm us.

Jonson's "diligent kind of negligence," Cunningham's "noticeably unnoticeable style," and Trimpi's "fashionless style" do not wholly describe the style of Wordsworth's blank verse. But they do describe his blank verse at times, and they describe one of his central intentions, evident in this brief description of the Wanderer:

Plain his garb;
Such as might suit a rustic Sire, prepared
For sabbath duties; yet he was a man
Whom no one could have passed without remark. (*The Excursion* I, 420-23)

The rustic slant arose out of the new subject matter and is related to Wordsworth's rejection of eighteenth-century artifice. When this slant is taken up by the freedom-celebrating Whitman in a half-wild, democratic

America, matters of form and structure almost disappear as considerations beneath the overwhelming presence of the rhetoric of personal conviction. The plainness of Crabbe, let alone of Jonson, is by then a long way off. Whitman, nevertheless, claimed to be a poet of plain garb.

Chapter Two: Whitman and Dickinson

> So, it is no longer enough to dismiss the period of romantic America as one in which too many Christians temporized their Christianity by *merging* it with a misguided cult of Nature. No scorn of the refined, no condescension of sophisticated critics toward the vagaries of romance, can keep us from feeling the pull: the American, or at least the American artist, cherishes in his innermost being the *impulse* to reject completely the gospel of civilization, in order to guard with resolution the *savagery* of his heart.
>
> —Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (216, italics added)

Change the word "savagery" to the more accurate *primitivism*[28] or *barbarism*, and Miller's statement about the American artist curiously touches upon the poetry of Emily Dickinson as well as that of Walt Whitman. It also suggests the motive for the kind of plainness Whitman advocated and to some degree achieved, and, paradoxically, for that which in Dickinson's poetry is *not* plain. The words "merging" and "impulse" are at least as important as "savagery," or primitivism or barbarism. For they describe the way in which the artist might reject civilisation for the wilderness; they are words central to

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[28] Primitivism, of course, is generally valued by the Romantics. In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams points out that the primitive was identified with the natural and the passionate (and therefore sincere): "Though romantic critics disagreed violently on the merits of primitive poetry, most of them accepted the hypothesis that it had its inception in passionate utterance—rather than, as Aristotle had assumed, in an instinct for imitation" (101). Hence mimesis is held in disrepute by the Romantic, and the natural is highly esteemed:

> Wordsworth's cardinal standard of poetic value is "nature," and nature, in his usage, is given a triple and primitivistic connotation: Nature is the common denominator of human nature; it is most reliably exhibited among men living "according to nature" (that is to say, in a culturally simple, and especially a rural environment); and it consists primarily in an elemental simplicity of thought and feeling and a spontaneous and "unartificial" mode of expressing feeling in words. (105)

As we have seen, blank verse was Wordsworth's primary "'unartificial,'" or relatively plain, "mode." Whitman would seek a plainer means yet, and would do so on Romantic and primitivistic premises.

Romanticism: the poet advocates acting on impulse, and the impulse is, ultimately, to merge with Nature. In so doing, the poet—at least in his poetry but sometimes in his life as well—is seeking death, the ultimate merging or fusion. Death was the great subject for both Whitman and Dickinson. For him, death was very much a matter of merging, and his preoccupation with it was a logical consequence of his immersion in sensuous experience, of his engrossment with perception. For her, death was more simply a mystery she wanted solved; like other aspects of life it was something she sought to define, and her concern for definition, and therefore concepts, prevented her from endorsing the doctrine of fusion. With respect to death, as well as to other subjects, Whitman, despite his occasional admissions of ignorance of causes, was the poet of definiteness. Setting himself up as a seer, he claimed to know a great many things, both within and beyond our experience. Dickinson, though she had a quieter way, was a much tougher, a more rigorous poet. She was the poet of definitiveness; she sought and often found knowledge by attempting to define experience. Definiteness was a rhetorical trick of Whitman's, but it was also the natural result of the combination in him of an overwhelming enthusiasm and a complete, unquestioned acceptance of Romantic precepts. Dickinson's poems are not those of an enthusiast, and her definitiveness suggests an intellect that would question Romantic precepts and pull back from "the impulse to reject completely the gospel of civilization." Although both poets were primitives, their poetry reveals radically different beliefs, ways of seeing the world. These beliefs, of course, made for the radically different poetry and plainness each poet sought and sometimes achieved. Nevertheless, the plainness peculiar to each poet is also in part due to the primitivist urge, and the way in which their extraordinary, eccentric personalities responded to it.

I

Walt Whitman's Democratic Plainspokenness

> Shall I speak plain, and in a nation free
> Assume an honest layman's liberty?
> . . . .
> It [the Bible] speaks itself, and what it does contain
> In all things needful to be known is plain.
> . . . .
> . . . this unpolish'd, rugged verse I chose,
> As fittest for discourse and nearest prose.
> —Dryden, *Religio Laici* (ll. 316-17, 368-69, 353-54)

Liberty (or freedom of speech), the pursuit of truth, and how to represent truth plainly in verse were not problems unique to Walt Whitman, though he has, for better or worse, become known as the preeminent poet of liberty, or democracy, and of plainspokenness. Dryden, in socially and politically unstable Restoration England, found the heroic couplet (not yet of Pope's closed variety, but of the more flexible, controlled "run-over" kind) suited to his purpose of rational argument. Wordsworth found blank verse (often of a grand or affectedly grand variety, sometimes relatively plain) conducive to his purpose of conveying subjective experience; Milton's medium provided Wordsworth with the means of expressing his religious feeling for Nature and for the personal history that he created in "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*, and which obviously had bearings in reality. Blank verse was the ideal form for his subject matter because of the freedom of expression it permitted. In Wordsworth's hands, it gave voice to our having moved from the old didactic absolutist age, represented by the heroic couplet, to the new didactic relativistic age. Whitman, in a sense, is Wordsworth gone wild, which is to say that he is the real thing, or about as close to the real thing as possible.

Only in a half-wild America (England had long ceased to be wild, and Canada's wildness was held in check by its Britishness, by the British Constitution and the North West Mounted Police), and only in a civilised part of America—like New York—could a poet emerge as the most complete representative of the Romantic doctrines that Europe had been developing for a century or more. Whitman, with his celebrated enthusiasm and sympathy and his commitment to democratic principles, was especially well suited temperamentally to embody and adapt Romantic values, such as those of subjectivism, individualism, spontaneity, expressiveness, and the belief in the essential goodness of man and of nature. Given Whitman's values and beliefs, and given the immediate history of the long line in English poetry, from the encasement of language in the closed couplet to the loosening of speech in Wordsworthian blank verse, it now seems inevitable that a Whitman, although he was not the first to write in the way he did, would adopt a cadenced prose as his poetic medium. Whitman, in a raw republic committed to democracy with a vigour never seen before, found that an open form—one which was itself intended to express freedom from what Whitman liked to call European feudalism—was essential to his purpose of shaping a new, distinctly American poetry.

The claims to plainness that this new poetry would make naturally involved both subject matter and style. This famous passage from Emerson's essay, "The Poet" (published in 1844) has often been cited as particularly relevant to Whitman's work, and as probably having influenced him:

> I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. (*Selections from RWE*, 238)

Whitman dared to chaunt and to celebrate. The "profoundness" of his celebrations, though, amounted to a depth of feeling for "all things" rather than a depth of understanding (thus definiteness rather than definitiveness). With an enthusiastic tone that obscures the ominous import for the terms "plainness" and "profoundness," Emerson stipulates the subject matter of his poet:

> We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the Middle Age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphi, and are as swiftly passing away. Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats [*sic*] and repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters. (238)

Such is the rhetoric of Emersonian enthusiasm: the tone, the piling up of disparate entities, the subtle appeal to our better selves (represented by the celebration of the American propensity for honesty and hard work), and the basic belief in the fundamental goodness of things that the listing suggests, actually work against the acquisition of plainness and profoundness. He would be a genius indeed who could do the impossible. For all the plainness and profoundness produced by the West—from Plato to Hume, from St. Paul to the translators of the King James Version, from Chaucer to J. V. Cunningham—has depended upon the intelligent mind, sometimes the genius, being able to make distinctions. But Emerson, and later Whitman, did not make distinctions. Emerson's method, his enthusiasm, not only works against plainness and profoundness, it also obscures plainness as a desirable end at all. Yet it is insisted upon, along with profoundness and chaunting the times—and the inclusion of this third aim points to the conflict of interests in Emerson's scheme. For the strutting cock is known neither for plainness nor profoundness. By the time we come to "America is a poem in our eyes," we have perhaps been swept along by the rhetoric into thinking that profoundness is attainable through an all-embracing, transcendental enthusiasm, and that plainness, if we have remembered it at all (for there is nothing much plain about Emerson's prose), ought, as a stylistic end, to reflect that enthusiasm, and, in terms of subject matter, entail the candid exposition of private experience.

America, the poem, had simply to be copied down, or at least metrified: "its ample geography dazzles the imagination," Emerson writes, "and it will not wait long for meters." Whitman, too, in the 1855 "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*, wrote, "[t]he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (411), and his poetry attempts to convey that sense of "ample geography," and of the dazzled imagination:

> Chants of the prairies,
> Chants of the long-running Mississippi, and down to the
> Mexican sea,
> Chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and
> Minnesota,
> Chants going forth from the centre from Kansas, and
> thence equidistant,
> Shooting in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all.
>
> 4
>
> Take my leaves America, take them South and take them
> North,
> Make welcome for them everywhere, for they are your
> own offspring . . . . ("Starting from Paumanok,"
> *CPSP* 16)

This is probably not quite what Emerson had in mind when he prophesied that America would "not wait long for meters," though the repetition of "chants" and "take" and the proximity to traditional metres in the last two lines do lay claim to Whitman's having had some concern for form. Whitman, however, whose imagination appears to have been dazzled at least as much by Emerson, or by the potential in himself for fulfilling Emerson's prophecy, as by America, could still have found sanction for his poetics in "The Poet":

> The sign and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man foretold. . . . For we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in meter, but of the true poet. . . . Our poets are men of talents who sing, and not the children of music. The argument is secondary, the finish of the verse is primary.
>
> For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. (225)

Emerson merely confuses the matter with the "architecture" of plant and animal spirits, a manifestation of Coleridge's "organic form," as he does when, after arguing the limitations of metre and of "men of talents who sing," he extols true poets as "the children of music." But clarity was never one of Emerson's strong points. Still, his position in the ancient debate over matter and words, meaning and style, is basically, and curiously, that avowed by Wordsworth and Dryden and Jonson and the native plain stylists (with due respect to the distinct characteristics of their poetry)—that the poet should be most concerned with his argument. Where he differs from these poets is in failing to recognise that metre, if it does not by itself "make" the poem, can in the hands of a skilled poet "make" an argument—that is, play an essential, not an ornamental, role in the making of an argument. Emerson's down-playing of metre here ought not to be read as advocating metreless verse (he of course wrote in metres himself), but it is easy to see how his position might reinforce Whitman's poetics. It is likely, too, that his view grew out of the eighteenth-century split between style, and therefore the handling of metre, and content—plainness and profoundness can do, so the argument would run, very well without superfluous, ornamental "clothing." Whitman's dismissal of traditional forms, especially of metre and rhyme (it does not matter that he sometimes used both, or that he occasionally claimed that there was, after all, some value in the poetry of "feudal Europe"), may be seen as an attempt not only to make a new poetry for America, but once and for all to give full expression to the poet's matter without the perceived hindrances imposed by form. Nor does it matter, for the moment, that form enabled poets, especially those of the Renaissance, to discover the utmost precision for their arguments.

"The argument is secondary," Emerson says disparagingly of American poetry before Whitman, "the finish of the verse is primary." That Whitman endorsed this view is evident throughout his writings; this passage from "Democratic Vistas" (1871) echoes it and implies Whitman's total commitment to a principle that runs throughout modernist and postmodernist poetics, and may itself be interpreted as making for a modern kind of plainness, the fallacy of imitative form:[29]

> Dominion strong is the body's; dominion stronger is the mind's. What has fill'd, and fills today our intellect, our fancy, furnishing the standards therein, is yet foreign. The great poems, Shakspere included, are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the lifeblood of democracy. The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands, ultramarine, have had their birth in courts, and bask'd and grown in castle sunshine; all smells of princes' favors. Of workers of a certain sort, we have, indeed, plenty, contributing after their kind; many elegant, many learn'd, all complacent. But touch'd by the national test, or tried by the standards of democratic personality, they wither to ashes. I say I have not seen a single writer, artist, lecturer, or what not, that has confronted the voiceless but ever erect and active, pervading, underlying will and typic aspiration of the land, in a spirit kindred to itself. Do you call those genteel little creatures American poets? Do you term that perpetual, pistareen, paste-pot work, American art, American drama, taste, verse? I think I hear, echoed as from some mountaintop afar in the west, the scornful laugh of the Genius of these States. (*CPSP* 474)

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[29] See page 64 of Winters' *In Defense of Reason* for the definition of imitative form.

Whitman does not prove or even argue, he asserts that the "great poems, Shakspere included, are poisonous" to democratic America. Since the great poems were not written by men living in democratic states, they cannot pertain to those living in a democracy (again, it does not matter that Whitman elsewhere contradicts himself on this point); furthermore, the reasoning goes, those genteel poets who follow the example set by the writers of the "great poems"—and the example is mainly followed by writing in traditional forms—fail the "national test," because form must be expressive of the time and place, and especially of the politics of the time and place, to which the poet belongs. A truly American poet will write "in a spirit kindred" to the land; or, as Yvor Winters aptly puts it, Whitman advocated, and was the first example of, "trying to express a loose America by writing loose poetry" (*IDR* 62). Whitman himself, however, says in his "Preface" to *Two Rivulets* (1876) that he was trying to loosen America; this to some extent contradicts the position held in the passage quoted from "Democratic Vistas":

> In that former and main Volume [*Leaves of Grass*], composed in the flush of my health and strength, from the age of 30 to 50 years, I dwelt on Birth and Life, *clothing my ideas in pictures*, days, transactions of my time, to give them positive place, identity—saturating them with that vehemence of pride and audacity of freedom necessary to loosen the mind of still-to-be-form'd America from the accumulated folds, the superstitions, and all the long, tenacious and stifling anti-democratic authorities of the Asiatic and European past—my enclosing purport being to express, above all artificial regulation and aid, the eternal Bodily Character of One's-Self. (*CPSP* 436, italics added)

(The phrase "clothing my ideas in pictures" is emphasised here but will be addressed further on in this discussion.) Satisfying the "national test," or "the standards of democratic personality," demands of the poet a subjective approach to experience that scorns the artifice of form as being false to American, if not indeed all human, experience. The subjectivism, presumably, is thereby transcended so as to enable the poet to evoke a pleasant aspect from "the Genius of these States."

Like Emerson, then, Whitman emphasised matter over words, and his matter was ultimately himself; he was, if not the "Genius" of whom he speaks, at least a close acquaintance. Romantic values—individualism, subjectivism, the impulse to merge, the celebration of emotion for its own sake—were at the root of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, but the "leaves" were American; Romantic values had been mixed into the American soil, and the *Leaves* would be nourished not only by them, but by an American emphasis on freedom, which was interpreted as necessitating freedom from form. This was the easy road to take. The hard road was to find freedom *within* form, the freedom of utterance that comes from precision and that awaits discovery by the poetic talent or genius by means of form. By using form to attain consummate artistry the poet, inadvertently as it were, gives expression to his individual character (do Shakespeare's sonnets not express a distinct character? Donne's? Milton's? do not Dickinson's poems? Hardy's?) while at the same time giving the fullest possible attention to the meaning of the particular human experience addressed in the poem. As the amiable and sympathetic Robert Louis Stevenson says in "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman" (1878),

> [h]e has chosen a rough, unrhymed, lyrical verse; sometimes instinct with a fine processional movement; often so rugged and careless that it can only be described by saying that he has not taken the trouble to write prose. I believe myself that it was selected principally because it was easy to write, although not without recollections of the marching measures of some of the prose in our English Old Testament. (Woodress 113)

This is not to say that it would be easy to write exactly the way in which Whitman wrote (though he is certainly amongst the most easily parodied of major poets), for if one were to persist long enough in the attempt there would accumulate enough stylistic and thematic traits to result in a voice distinct from Whitman's. Allen Ginsberg, perhaps more than any other poet, has followed Whitman's example; yet Ginsberg has a fairly distinct voice. Whitman's view of the matter as it is expressed toward the end of "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1888) is surely right:

> "Leaves of Grass" indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me. But it is not on "Leaves of Grass" distinctly as *literature*, or a specimen thereof, that I feel to dwell, or advance claims. No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism. (*CPSP* 454)

There is no question that Whitman's method enabled him to give expression to his unique character. But, equally, it is obvious that the traditional use of form—and the word *use*, giving full scope to the poet's active, fully conscious role in the process of composition, is worth emphasising here—could not legitimately be equated with muffling the unique voice of the poet in so much feudalistic or aristocratic cotton batting. The "great poems" did not have "their birth in courts" but in, if not always great minds, the minds of great poets. They are not "poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the lifeblood of democracy"; they are poisonous to such evils as brutality and stupidity and, above all, ignorance. Whitman, of course, despite Emerson's call for the "meter-making argument," never really *argued* the point. Rational arguments in the old medieval or Renaissance or eighteenth-century sense of the word were out of his reach, given the strength of his commitment to Romantic precepts. Rational arguments, whatever their origin, are available to any human being capable of comprehending them; but if Whitman had insisted he might, of course, have turned not to European precedents but to domestic ones, to those of Washington or Jefferson, for example. The Declaration of Independence itself is nothing if not a rational argument, whatever its flaws. But Whitman took it as axiomatic that the old forms could not help substantiating the society in which they were painstakingly produced. Ironically, he could not see how they might transcend the limitations imposed by that society. Reason had become something one used at one's convenience in life rather than a method by which to achieve clarity and precision in building arguments in prose or verse, as well as to understand life. Form shared reason's fate; their disintegration would result in a new American poetry. But, again ironically, this process was nothing other than a continuation of an Old World historical phenomenon.

There is a disturbing streak of determinism in all of this, perhaps emanating from the Calvinistic fragrance of the New England air. Whitman (though neither a Calvinist nor a New Englander) saw the poetry of Europe, the "great poems," as hopelessly determined by aristocracy, by the social and political framework within which the great poets wrote, and, more significantly, he believed that a truly American poetry would reflect, in Emerson's words (see p. 97 above), "the barbarism and materialism of the times." To his credit, however, Whitman defended the needs of the soul:

> It may be claim'd (and I admit the weight of the claim) that common and general worldly prosperity, and a populace well-to-do, and with all life's material comforts, is the main thing, and is enough. It may be argued that our republic is, in performance, really enacting today the grandest arts, poems, etc., by beating up the wilderness into fertile farms, and in her railroads, ships, machinery, etc. And it may be ask'd, Are these not better, indeed, for America, than any utterances even of greatest rhapsode, artist, or literatus?
>
> I too hail those achievements with pride and joy: then answer that the soul of man will not with such only—nay, not with such at all—be finally satisfied; but needs what, (standing on these and on all things, as the feet stand on the ground), is addressed to the loftiest, to itself alone. ("Democratic Vistas" 460)

Despite the somewhat superficial consideration of materialism (the *way* in which the land was being claimed and settled—*civilised* is not quite the word—ought to have been addressed by any serious social critic), we might say to this, so far so good. But, in his habitual stress on newness, Whitman turned not to Christianity, or, say, to Arnold's Culture, or even to a home-made ethical system based upon Classical, Judaic, and Christian models. Whitman turned instead to "Personalism," a vague, home-made theory based upon Romantic individualism. This passage follows the one above:

> Out of such considerations, such truths, arises for treatment in these Vistas the important question of character, of an American stock-personality, with literatures and arts for outlets and return-expressions, and, of course, to correspond, within outlines common to all. To these, the main affair, the thinkers of the United States, in general so acute, have either given feeblest attention, or have remain'd, and remain, in a state of somnolence.

The spiritual element in Whitman's poetry is strongly represented in section 7 of "Starting from Paumanok":

> I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a
> religion, I descend into the arena . . .
> . . . .
>
> Each is not for its own sake,
> I say the whole earth and all the stars in the sky are for
> religion's sake.
>
> I say no man has ever yet been half devout enough,
> None has ever yet adored or worshipp'd half enough,
> None has begun to think how divine he himself is, and
> how certain the future is.
>
> I say that the real and permanent grandeur of these States
> must be their religion,
> Otherwise there is no real and permanent grandeur;
> (Nor character nor life worthy the name without religion,
> Nor land nor man nor woman without religion.)

The question is, what kind of religion? To what should one's devoutness be directed? Whitman, like many of his contemporaries and many literary figures since his time, appears to have felt the emotional need for Christianity but could not endorse it intellectually. The result in his case is a vague spirituality that tries to include materialism and individualism (with a concomitant barbarism) in its sweep. There was a spiritual aura to his vision of America but no focus.

It might be said that democracy was the focus. To regard, however, a political system as a religious institution has inherent difficulties—such an attempt can never get beyond similitude, a figurative interpretation of the relationship between two distinct areas of human endeavour. Whitman clearly regarded democracy in a religious light; to it, though, he added his brand of individualism. "The average man of a land," he proclaims in "Democratic Vistas," "at last only is important" (473), for democracy is shaped by the average. But, he adds,

> to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, is surely join'd another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite . . . . This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—identity—personalism. Whatever the name, its acceptance and thorough infusions through the organizations of political commonalty now shooting Aurora-like about the world, are of utmost importance, as the principle itself is needed for very life's sake. It forms, in a sort, or is to form, the compensating balance-wheel of the successful working machinery of aggregate America. (476)

A democracy must respect individuality, and Whitman was profoundly struck by the irreducibility of his second principle; the simple fact of *being* moved him:

> There is, in sanest hours, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity—yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest of basic fact, and only entrance to all facts. In such devout hours, in the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth (significant only because of the Me in the center), creeds, conventions, fall away

> and become of no account before this simple idea. Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value . . . .
>
> The quality of BEING, in the object's self, according to its own central idea and purpose, . . . is the lesson of Nature. (477-78)

In a sort of calm, Wordsworthian meditative mood, Whitman arrives spontaneously at the "I am," and, overwhelmed by the basic goodness of this fact, goes on in his poetry to celebrate it, time and again: "I will effuse egotism and show it underlying all, and I will be the bard of personality . . ." ("Starting from Paumanok," section 12); "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," "I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones" ("Song of Myself," sections 1 and 20). The logic goes: "I am, therefore I am good." And there is much to be said for this logic, though Aquinas's crucial qualification—that which exists is good insofar as it can be said to exist—makes for a considerable improvement on it: "[s]omething that does not possess the ultimate perfection that it ought to have [in order to be called good in an unqualified sense], even though it possess some perfection by virtue of the fact that it actually exists, is nevertheless not called perfect without qualification, or good in an unqualified sense, but only in a qualified way" (161-62).

Whitman, significantly, identified the realisation of this principle with sanity, with health. Personalism, reduced to the level of simple being, could stand against the artificial (this passage directly follows the one above):

> True, the full man wisely gathers, culls, absorbs; but if, engaged disproportionately in that, he slights or overlays the precious idiocrasy and special nativity and intention that he is, [then] the man's self, the main thing, is a failure, however wide his general cultivation. Thus, in our times, refinement and delicatesse are not only attended to sufficiently, but threaten to eat us up, like a cancer. Already, the democratic genius watches, ill-pleased, these tendencies. Provision for a little healthy rudeness, savage virtue, justification of what one has in one's self, whatever it is, is demanded. Negative qualities, even deficiencies, would be a relief. Singleness and normal simplicity and separation, amid this more and more complex, more and more artificialized state of

> society—how pensively we yearn for them! how we would welcome their return! (478)

The simplicity Whitman speaks of is represented in the poems by plainspokenness and artlessness, or virtual formlessness. The simplicity, the admired "calm," and the kind of individualism that Whitman urged, are reminiscent of Wordsworth's advice to Coleridge at the end of Book II of *The Prelude*:

> Fare thee well!
> Health and the quiet of a healthful mind
> Attend thee! seeking oft the haunts of men,
> And yet more often living with thyself,
> And for thyself, so haply shall thy days
> Be many, and a blessing to mankind.

Similar calms occur at times in Whitman's long lines, but they are much more frequent and affecting in Wordsworth's blank verse. The longing for the simple life is much the same. It is one thing, however, to advise individualism in a Coleridge, the results of which are likely to attain to the hoped for blessing; it is another thing to call for a "healthy average personalism" ("Democratic Vistas" 478) from the roughs. Whether by Wordsworth or Whitman, simplicity, or plainness, was urged in the face of a growing complexity of life. The primitive element is stronger in Whitman because of the vast fact of America.

In "Democratic Vistas" Whitman prophetically describes the great poet: "[t]he great literatus will be known, among the rest, by his cheerful simplicity, his adherence to natural standards, his limitless faith in God, his reverence, and by the absence in him of doubt, ennui, burlesque, persiflage, or any strained and temporary fashion" (493). The Romantic, or Wordsworthian, simplicity of the poet will be represented by a fashionless style. The appeal to Whitman of the theory of a plain style, even of a *classical* variety, is evident in Floyd Stovall's discussion, in *The Foreground of Leaves of*

Grass (1974), of notes that Whitman wrote to himself. Here, Stovall is discussing an article by Aubrey De Vere that appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, which Whitman clipped and annotated, and which Stovall is "convinced . . . had a definite influence on Whitman, especially the latter part that is concerned with 'over-coloring,' self-possession, and moderation in poetic art" (277):

> On page 190 the critic [De Vere] praises a poem of Wordsworth in which, he says, "so little is expressed, and so much implied." Whitman copied these words at the bottom of the page and underlined them. On page 191 he underlined a passage containing the sentence, "With the merely technical rules of style poetry has indeed little concern." He also underlined and bracketed the following sentence and drew two hands pointing to it: "Without a pure and masterly style, a poet may be popular, but he will never become classical." In warning against overstrained effort in revising until "all freshness has been dissipated," the critic says "Any excessive tension of the faculties precludes the highest species of art—art which hides itself." Figures of speech "brought in to make plainer what is already plain" divert attention, and "over-vivacious expressions which, as it were, admire themselves" are a defect. Citing examples from Shelley and Byron he added: "But would Homer, or Dante, or Shakspeare, have variegated their poetic robes with such purple patches?" At the bottom of page 189 Whitman wrote: "The substance is always wanted perfect—after that attend to costumes—but mind, attend to costumes." (275-76)

When Whitman speaks, in the "Preface" to *Two Rivulets* (see p. 80 above), of "clothing [his] ideas in pictures," he is an advocate of imagism, but he retains, in a provincial way and somewhat surprisingly, the language of Neo-classical poetics. So, too, when he speaks above of "'costumes,'" although that word appears to refer generally to figurative devices rather than to images alone. He appears to believe that the split between content and style is a split between substance and ornament, and that that split is irrevocable, although he does imply that style is not equated with ornament when he says in the "Preface" that "[m]ost works are most beautiful without ornament" (421). In any case, it is important to recognise that Whitman was not simply concerned with eschewing "'the merely technical rules of poetry.'" He was also concerned with attaining to the classical, and the way in which this was to be accomplished was by creating "'art which hides itself'"—figures were to be used sparingly; it was "'substance'" that mattered most. Whitman's interest in classicism makes good sense if we recognise that the principle of plainness links some of his most vital poetic intentions to the classical past.

One of the most often quoted statements by Whitman on art, and probably the most important, is to be found in the 1855 "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*:

> The art of art, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity . . . [*sic*] nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness. To carry on the heave of impulse and pierce intellectual depths and give all subjects their articulations are powers neither common nor very uncommon. But to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insousiance [*sic*] of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the *flawless triumph* of art. If you have looked on him who has achieved it you have looked on one of the masters of the artists of all nations and times. You shall not contemplate the flight of the graygull over the bay or the mettlesome action of the blood horse or the tall leaning of sunflowers on their stalk or the appearance of the sun journeying through heaven or the appearance of the moon afterward with any more satisfaction than you shall contemplate him. The greatest poet has *less a marked style* and is *more the channel of thoughts and things* without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for *precisely* what it is. Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or sooth [*sic*] I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as *regardless of observation*. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition *without a shred of my composition*. You shall stand by my side and *look in the mirror with me*. (417-18, italics added)

Despite the figurative language, and despite the words "regardless of observation" ("observation" meaning *commentary*), Whitman would make plain all that is inside us and all that is out there, and he would attempt to do so with precision in imagistic techniques and with an "'art which hides itself.'" The role of the artist is ominously passive. Whether this is due primarily to an extreme interpretation of the doctrine of inspiration, or to Whitman's moral relativism (the artist must be passive for he supposedly makes no judgements), or to some other cause is difficult to say. The intended effect, however, is to realise the truth of things, to do in literature what nature does. In this way, using "a less marked style," comes precision and simplicity, or a certain kind of plainness. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the idea that the artist should copy nature in this way is a Romantic theory that appealed to Ezra Pound.

The Romantic idealism of Whitman is evident in his recurrent use of crystalline images and metaphors. Such an image was likely at the back of his mind when he speaks above of the "flawless triumph of art." In "Democratic Vistas" he says that "moral conscientiousness, crystalline, without flaw, not Godlike only, entirely human, awes and enchants forever" (493), and in a footnote a page later writes: "Conscience, too, isolated from all else, and from the emotional nature, may but attain the beauty and purity of glacial, snowy ice." The crystalline image or metaphor has a death-like quality; it expresses, too, Whitman's vision of moral perfection, which entails accepting as natural what has been thought of as evil. Hence, "to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insousiance [*sic*] of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside" is to achieve "perfect personal candor" (1855 "Preface" 422): "Men and women and the earth and all upon it are simply to be taken as they are, and the investigation of their past and present and future shall be unintermitted and shall be done with perfect candor" (1855 "Preface" 419). In section 7 of "Starting from Paumanok" this primitive approach to the problem of evil is simplistically, unpersuasively, and (barring the soap-box speaker's rhetoric) plainly stated:

> Omnes! omnes! let others ignore what they may,
> I make the poem of evil also, I commemorate that part also,
> I am myself as much evil as good, and my nation is—and I
> say there is in fact no evil,
> (Or if there is I say it is just as important to you, to the land
> or to me, as any thing else.)

There is a certain wisdom in accepting the fact of evil and in recognising that good may come of it. But to doubt the existence of evil is a dangerous, even pernicious, sort of primitivism. It is, of course, highly unlikely to be advocated by any truly primitive people; in fact, it is conceivable only in the civilised man or woman, and is therefore perverse, even parasitic upon civilisation. For it threatens to undermine the foundations of civilisation, and the threat is a serious one. The unintentionality of this threat does not make it any less dangerous. Also, that sometimes great evils have been committed in the name of civilisation emphasises rather than negates the importance of seeing evil, whenever we can, for what it is.

Whitman's view of evil and his crystalline idealism permitted what has been both lauded and decried as an opening up of subject matter. In the area of human relations, whether of "amativeness" (relations between the sexes) or "adhesiveness" (the camaraderie of men), Whitman's plainspokenness is legendary. There was nothing strikingly new about such plainspokenness, however; Donne, especially in the elegies, was far more plain-spoken, and outrageous, than Whitman when it comes to sexuality; and Donne was aware of classical precedents. It is not that Whitman's subject matter is new but that his naive approach to it is. Denying or at least doubting the existence of evil, all sense of guilt and impropriety is removed from his treatment of sex (whereas

Donne, for instance, depended on a sense of propriety for his effects). His purpose is stated in section 12 of "Starting from Paumanok":

> And sexual organs and acts! do you concentrate in me, for
> I am determin'd to tell you with courageous clear
> voice to prove you illustrious,
> And I will show that there is no imperfection in the
> present, and can be none in the future,
> And I will show that whatever happens to anybody it may
> be turn'd to beautiful results,
> And I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful
> than death . . . .

Or, as he says in section 24 of "Song of Myself":

> Through me forbidden voices,
> Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the
> veil,
> Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.
>
> I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
> I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head
> and heart,
> Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.
>
> I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
> Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and
> tag of me is a miracle.
>
> Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I
> touch or am touch'd from,
> The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
> This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

Whitman was so taken with being that he got carried away. But, with considerable irony, his plainness about human sexuality (which is here, significantly, mitigated by the use of a Latinate rather than an Anglo-Saxon term for the sex act) utterly fails at the human level.

Morton L. Ross, in "Walt Whitman and the Limits of Embarrassment" (1968), pinpoints the problem:

> To find these chants of sex erotic is as absurd as being aroused by a hydro-electric installation. . . . Whitman "transfigures" sexual love into a force that can only be registered on the meters and gauges of physics—not on the more sensitive instruments of genuine human feeling. The result is poetry that should and does embarrass us, *not* because it unveils sex, but rather because it

> changes the mysteries of sexual love into a public utility, detached, disembodied, and, contrary to Whitman's intentions, dehumanized. (33)

Whitman saw that sexuality was being neglected in poetry and did something about it; in the process he was seeking truth and strove to speak as a plain man. He succeeded insofar as he undauntedly celebrated the fact of sex in his primitive way. But there is no satisfactory understanding of human sexuality; sex, "copulation," is reduced, if not to something mechanical, at least to the purely animal, even if this is celebrated in explicitly spiritual terms. *Children of Adam* notwithstanding, the mysteries of sexual *love* were safe from Whitman. Passages in the poetry that may be found erotic—that of the masturbating woman in section 11 of "Song of Myself," or of the labours of the "Bridegroom night of love" in section 5 of "I Sing the Body Electric," or of the masturbating young man in "Spontaneous Me"—express a knowledge of passion in the sense of, usually pent-up, intense sexual desire, rather than an understanding of fulfilled sexual love between two *living* human beings. The sex is there, the love is only there in name, insisted upon but not realised: "Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice . . ." ("I Sing the Body Electric"), and so on.

But one can appreciate the attempt at honesty, despite the failure. Stevenson may have been right when he said of Whitman, "I wish I could believe he was quite honest with us; but indeed, who was ever quite honest who wrote a book for a purpose? It is a flight beyond the reach of human magnanimity." Stevenson also said of Whitman's handling of sex that, "[i]n his desire to accept all facts loyally and simply, it fell within his programme to speak at some length and with some plainness on what is, for I really do not know what reason, the most delicate of subjects" (Woodress 115). William J. Fox, an early reviewer of *Leaves of Grass*, with good reason felt obliged to suggest that there is something refreshing "in the bare strength, the unhesitating frankness of a man who 'believes in the flesh and the appetites,' and who dares to call simplest things by their plainest names" (Woodress 44). Of course, the frankness and honesty have been doubted for as long as they have been praised (the unauthorised publication by Whitman of Emerson's admiring letter to him in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1856 is perhaps the evidence most damaging to his partly self-perpetuated reputation for honesty), and the poetry is sometimes absurd, and the plainness qualified by Latinate language and smatterings of words and phrases from modern languages, and by shimmering imagistic details and by the crass rhetoric ubiquitous to *Leaves of Grass*. But, again, the attempt at honesty, or frankness, the *intention* to be plain, in some respects cannot be doubted and ought to be appreciated—not primarily because of its newness, but because of its new expression of a very old intention.

The crystalline images and metaphors that Whitman was fond of suggest the clue that links his avowed simplicity (frankness, plainspokenness) with his imagistic preoccupations. Stovall, speaking of the "ambivalences of temperament" that overlie the "basic unity of character" in *Leaves of Grass*, points out that

> [i]t would be a mistake . . . to stress Whitman's love of the primitive in poetry without giving due consideration to his genuine appreciation of the more deliberate art of his modern antecedents and contemporaries. . . . He loved the "florid, rich, first phases of poetry, as in the oriental poems, in the Bible," but in his early directions to himself on composition he requires "a perfectly transparent, plate-glassy style." . . . He sounds like Wordsworth when he says that "originality must be of the spirit and show itself in new combinations and new meanings and discovering greatness and harmony where there was before thought no greatness"; but in the same note he sounds a bit like a classicist in saying the style must be "carefully purged of anything striking or dazzling or ornamental." Yet Whitman was to no appreciable extent a classicist. Insofar as there was conflict

> between two literary methods it was between the method of the philosophical romanticist and the graphic realist. (191)

As has been suggested, Whitman outdid Wordsworth as a Romantic; and as a graphic realist he, in a sense, occasionally outdid Crabbe. He shares Crabbe's love for details and, as at the end of section 5 of "Song of Myself," the details are sometimes unconventional:

> And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
> And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
> And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,
> mullein and poke-weed.

But he outdoes Crabbe by explicitly celebrating ugliness along with everything else:

> What was strewn in the amplest strewing the square rod
> about me, and not filling the square rod then,
> The bull and the bug never worshipp'd half enough,
> Dung and dirt more admirable than was dream'd . . . . (§ 41,
> "Song")

Inspired by an undiscriminating enthusiasm for being, Whitman's Romantic impulses and graphic realism at times combined to represent the objective, material world with imagistic precision (though in the last quotation the importance of the material world is not imagistic at all but merely asserted). Crystalline images and metaphors represented the pristine, "Adamic" moral consciousness; as the phrase, "transparent, plate-glassy style" suggests, they also represented the way in which the material world—from the "brown ants" and the leaf of grass to the brawn of the roughs and the twinkling of the stars—ought to be portrayed.

The formula is one for imagism. But before concluding with a look at some of the implications of Whitman's imagistic technique, it is worth considering how his poetics related to his professed respect for individualism. That respect has been expressed in some of the quotations already made. Here is another, from an anonymous article in the *Boston Herald* (April 18, 1881) written for the occasion of a visit to Boston by Whitman. The voice in the article sounds like, and may well be, Whitman's; it is certainly convinced of the soundness of Whitman's principles of frankness and individualism:

> Perhaps frankness may be said to be the keynote of Walt Whitman's nature. He glows with responsive cordiality. He is not afraid to be himself, and he asserts it with ideal American unconventionality—that is, he is thoroughly individual in his personal ways and expressions, and all without offence to the individualism of others. (Woodress 70)

Whitman's famous cordiality might seem to suggest urbanity, were it not for his primitivistic individualism, which insists only upon the uniqueness and separateness of experience rather than upon the existence of, in Wesley Trimpi's words, "shared experience" and the adoption of "similar emotional attitudes toward it" (*BJP* 189). There is cordiality in respecting the individualism of others, but as D. H. Lawrence ingeniously observes in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), Whitman's avowed respect for individuality was tainted by another of his central doctrines, his interpretation of sympathy:

> Your mainspring is broken, Walt Whitman. The mainspring of your own individuality. And so you run down with a great whirr, merging with everything.
>
> . . . .
>
> I am everything and everything is me and so we're all One in One identity, like the Mundane Egg, which has been addled quite a while.
>
> > Whoever you are, to endless announcements—
> > And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.
>
> Do you? Well, then, it just shows you haven't *got* any self. It's a mush, not a woven thing.
>
> . . . .
>
> Whitman said Sympathy. If only he had stuck to it! Because Sympathy means feeling with, not feeling for. He kept on having a passionate feeling *for* the negro slave, or the prostitute, or the syphilitic. Which is merging. A sinking of Walt Whitman's soul in the souls of these others.
>
> . . . .

> Supposing he had felt true sympathy with the negro slave? He would have felt *with* the negro slave. Sympathy—compassion—which is partaking of the passion which was in the soul of the negro slave.
>
> . . . .
>
> If Whitman had truly *sympathised*, he would have said: "That negro slave suffers from slavery. He wants to free himself. His soul wants to free him. He has wounds, but they are the price of freedom. The soul has a long journey from slavery to freedom. If I can help him I will: I will not take over his wounds and his slavery to myself. But I will help him fight the power that enslaves him when he wants to be free, if he wants my help. Since I see in his face that he needs to be free. But even when he is free, his soul has many journeys down the open road, before it is a free soul." (177, 187, 188)

Lawrence's definition of sympathy—"[t]he soul judging for herself, and preserving her own integrity" (189)—recognises the crucial importance of judgement, of discrimination, in the process of feeling with others. As Lawrence makes clear, Whitman's definition of sympathy, or rather his definiteness about the need for it, was devoid of judgement. He was surely frank in feeling for others, but his feelings were misguided because, with the greatest irony, his interpretation of sympathy led to an inadequate respect for the individual soul, and, more generally, for the integrity of entities outside the self. Thus Whitman not only felt *for*—

> The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
> (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his
> mother's bed-room;)
>
> . . . .
>
> The young fellow drives the express-wagon, (I love him,
> though I do not know him;) . . . (§ 15, "Song")

—he even felt *as*:

> All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes
> mine,
> I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.
> The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
> The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry
> wood, her children gazing on,
> The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the
> fence, blowing, cover'd with sweat,
> The twinges that sting like needles in his legs and neck,
> the murderous buckshot and bullets,

All these I feel or am.
. . . .
Agonies are one of my changes of garments.
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself
become the wounded person . . . . (§ 33, "Song")

But he does not ask the wounded person if he may become him. This method resulted in the Whitmanian lists (if you insist on being everything it seems inevitable that you will want to take inventory of your various parts). It also resulted in Whitman's false sincerity, his definiteness:

I know I am solid and sound,
To me converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing
means.

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's
compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a
burnt stick at night.

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be
understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
(I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my
house by, after all.)

I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content. (§ 20, "Song")

The certainty is often marked by plain statement ("I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there"; "I exist as I am, that is enough"), which anticipates the poetry of plain statement by numerous twentieth-century poets.[30] And even the figurative touches—the "child's carlacue," the "level I plant my house by"—are of a mundane, home-spun variety, and so complement the low tone and the spirit of truthfulness. The primitivism is obvious. Whitman's knowledge, his definiteness, may be said to exist because *he* exists (the process of knowing that which exists outside the self is, of course, intuitive), and the he who exists is almost purely a perceiving he.

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[30] Some of these poets will be discussed in the conclusion of this study.

Perception, rather than conception, is the driving force behind Whitman's poetry. Whitman had that faculty that Ben Jonson distinctly had, if Drummond of Hawthornden's report is accurate: "[h]e hath consumed a whole night in lying looking to his great toe, about which he hath seen Tartars and Turks, Romans and Carthaginians, fight in his imagination" (602). It is not so much the faculty of "creative" imagination (which, for different reasons, is relatively inconspicuous in the poetry of both Jonson and Whitman) that is significant here; it is the faculty of being absorbed by the perceived object. Jonson's apparent propensity for such absorption was brought into focus by the conceptual apparatus through which he viewed the world. Whitman, as has been said, was overwhelmed by being, as he recognises in one of his "Inscriptions":

> Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
> The mere fact of consciousness, these forms, the power of
> motion,
> The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
> The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
> I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
> But stop and loiter all the time to sing in ecstatic songs.
> (*CPSP* 10)

Consequently, the poet merges, or attempts to merge, with the perceived object; in the process of composition, he becomes a maker of images. Whitman appeared at times to have felt to a distressing degree the power of perception. In the following lines from section 28 of "Song of Myself," the sense of touch overwhelms him; the traitors referred to are "the fellow-senses":

> I am given up by traitors,
> I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the
> greatest traitor,
> I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried
> me there.

> You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight
> in its throat,
> Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.

Jonson may have been saved from madness by his conceptual hold on the world (Christian faith certainly appears to have obviated the despair that threatens him in "To Heaven," and a vigorous, classical reason and stoicism likewise in "On My First Son"). Whitman seems to have been spared madness or suicide or the dissolution of his personality by his common-sense refusal to merge totally with the thing perceived. That is, he drew back from a full participation in the process that he committed himself to intellectually. His unshakable enthusiasm and optimism, too, undoubtedly had something to do with his salvation; these, in turn, seem to have been possible because of his civilised man's primitivism, which entailed a happy acceptance of things and a refusal to inquire into causes.

Materialism thus becomes essential:

> I accept Reality and dare not question it,
> Materialism first and last imbuing. (§ 23, "Song").

The imbuing results in a statement of belief based on the conviction that the perfection of the natural world provides a model for the poet:

> I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of
> the stars,
> And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and
> the egg of the wren,
> And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
> And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of
> heaven,
> And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all
> machinery,
> And the sow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any
> statue,
> And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of
> infidels. (§ 31, "Song")

This devout engagement with the material world thus reinforces Whitman's anti-formal position and results in his employment of imagistic techniques, which are sometimes exercised on a single object in a poem or a section of a poem, and sometimes on a catalogue of objects. As we have seen, Whitman was concerned with precision; in order to be true to his beliefs, in order to render his perceptions accurately, he had to become the first real imagist:

> The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the
> block swags underneath on its tied-over chain,
> The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard,
> steady and tall he stands pois'd on one leg on the
> string-piece,
> His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and
> loosens over his hip-band,
> His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of
> his hat away from his forehead,
> The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the
> black of his polish'd and perfect limbs. (§ 13,
> "Song")

This sort of thing in Whitman's work differs from the excellent descriptive details in Crabbe's in that it is offered purely for its own sake and invites merging. Crabbe's description, on the contrary, is more often than not motivated by a moral or didactic purpose and invites sympathy. Whitman merges, or is on the verge of merging, with his object (in this case, the negro); that we are invited to do the same is implicit in the naked attention devoted to the object. The description differs, too, from the Imagism of the early twentieth century in that it lacks the economy of language and the emotional suggestiveness of juxtaposed images that the later "school" theorised about. The intention, though, is similar in its devoutness.

The conclusion to which Whitman was driving from his perceptual premise was death. To merge with something outside the self means the death of the self. Depending on his mood, he viewed death, "the real reality" he calls it in "Scented Herbage of My Breast" (*Calamus*), with indifference—

> O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers, I think it must be for death,
> For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the atmosphere of lovers,
> Death or life I am indifferent, my soul declines to prefer. . .
> ("Scented Herbage")

—or with enthusiasm, as in the "carol of death" in section 14 of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd":

> *Come lovely and soothing death,*
> *Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,*
> *In the day, in the night, to all, to each,*
> *Sooner or later delicate death.*

Life is thus reduced to "the leavings of many deaths" (section 49, "Song of Myself"); or death results in some other, specified and unspecified, forms of life:

> This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
> Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
> Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.
>
> O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
> And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.
>
> ……
>
> What do you think has become of the young and old men?
> And what do you think has become of the women and children?

> They are alive and well somewhere,
> The smallest sprout shows there really is no death,
> And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait
> at the end to arrest it,
> And ceas'd the moment life appear'd. (§ 6, "Song")

Life and death, then, appear to be convertible. Whitman's celebration of the consequent insignificance of death—as in "How Solemn as One by One" (*Drum-Taps*): "O the bullet could never kill what you really are, dear friend, / Nor the bayonet stab what you really are . . ."—are not comforting at the human level. Despite his compassion for human beings, Whitman's chants of death fail to convey an adequate appreciation of the reality of loss. The seeming contradiction between "there really is no death" and seeing death as "the real reality" is resolved through conversion. The only proof we are offered as to the soundness of his vision of death is his intuited certainty, his definiteness:

> Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
> I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I
> know it.
>
> . . . .
>
> I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
> I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal
> and fathomless as myself,
> (They do not know how immortal, but I know.) (§ 7,
> "Song")

Again, Whitman embraced death in the way he did because of his primitive engrossment with perception. His interest in plainness is evident in his rejection of form (which, however, often simply resulted in formulaic writing) and in his attempts at plainspokenness. But it is also evident in his turning to imagism as the only adequate way to represent reality. Whitman may have been inspired in his imagism by Emerson, who says in "The Poet,"

> the rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael, have obviously no limits to their works except the limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing. (240)

If you are going to make it plain in the second half of nineteenth-century America, it would seem that you must do so without the frills of the old forms, with straight-talk, and with due attention to the perceptual element. In this way comes clarity and precision. Randall Jarrell, in *Poetry and the Age* (1953), recognised the connection between plainness and perception:

> Arnold all his life kept wishing that he could see the world "with a plainness as near, as flashing" as that with which Moses and Rebekah and the Argonauts saw it. He asked with elegiac nostalgia, "Who can see the green earth any more / As she was by the sources of Time?"— and all the time there was somebody alive who saw it so, as plain and near and flashing, and with a kind of calm, pastoral, Biblical dignity and elegance as well, sometimes. The *thereness* and *suchness* of the world are incarnate in Whitman as they are in few other writers. (130-31)

Plainness was still a desired end, but in modern America it seemed that revelation, the discovery of truth, had to be achieved in a new way.

II

Emily Dickinson and the Art of Definition

The poetry of Emily Dickinson substantiates the viability of the old way. It also inarguably demonstrates that the old way—the use of traditional forms—allows the original talent to develop its unique voice. Her attention to form, however, especially to metre, did not prevent her from falling into obscurity; in fact, it would appear that this very attention was partially the cause of much of her obscurity—that her determination to fit what she had to say into six- or eight-syllable lines often resulted in bad grammar and syntax, and perhaps the occasional cryptic figure. At such times, Dickinson is not plain; she is, like Whitman, barbaric, though not in the way that Whitman is barbaric. Her barbarism differs greatly from his because of her attention to form and a concomitant attention to definition, and even to definitiveness. Thus, her successful poems are civilized, even when they are not completely free of the barbaric element, which is merely a way of describing the eccentric individuality of her verse, its obscurity, its recalcitrance to urbanity. Whitman's barbarism, or primitivism, was an intentional, fatalistic doctrine, and was meant to achieve a democratic plainspokenness. Her barbarism, or primitivism, seems almost to have been thrust upon her by her situation; it was not, in the end, a wholly conscious intention, and its inadequacy is stark, especially in the face of the great triumphs she achieved. These triumphs, it will be argued, are never far removed from plainness and are often embodiments of the intention to be plain, though they are sometimes difficult to comprehend. Two poets writing in the same language and living at the same time and more or less in the same part of the world could not, it would seem, be less alike (only contemporaneous poets of the twentieth century might successfully challenge the disparateness of Whitman and Dickinson). It is contended here, however, that along with the other poets in this study they had the principle of plainness in common. Their conjunction is appropriate not only because they embodied in their poetry the "experimental" and "traditional" split that was incipient in the poetry of Wordsworth and Crabbe, and which exploded in the twentieth century, but also because their respective claims to plainness significantly comment on the reasons for that split. Whitman and Dickinson held different conceptions of plainness, but the principle was fundamental to both.

Emily Dickinson, perhaps more purely or persistently than any other poet, was concerned with what we can know. Whereas Whitman, with his Romantic enthusiasm and his habit of worship,[31] offers us certainty, definiteness, Dickinson offers definitions, wholly successful or not. George Santayana's definition of barbarism in "The Poetry of Barbarism" (*Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 1900) helps us to see the way in which Dickinson was *not* barbaric. Whitman and Browning, he claims,

> represent . . . and are admired for representing, what may be called the poetry of barbarism in the most accurate and descriptive sense of this word. For the barbarian is the man who regards his passions as their own excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal. He is the man who does not know his derivations nor perceive his tendencies, but who merely feels and acts, valuing in his life its force and its filling, but being careless of its purpose and its form. His delight is in abundance and vehemence; his art, like his life, shows an exclusive respect for quantity and splendour of materials. (176-77)

Being concerned with what we can know, Dickinson is not barbaric in Santayana's sense. On the one hand, her barbarism appears to be incidental; on the other, it appears at times to be willed. But the limits of her barbarism are clearly set by her overwhelming preoccupation with definition, whither in poems that try to say what it is to grieve, to experience spring or summer, to observe the living become the dead, or in poems that more simply define terms and in the process make sometimes profound comments on human experience.

That which is not plain in Dickinson is well known. In recent decades her barbarism has been held up as an edifice to Modernism and postmodernism, or the spirit of Romanticism, and not only with a sense of reverence for the praiseworthy features of these movements (which essentially come down to the emphasis on re-creation, or newness), but also for the blameworthy (the chaotic element, the destructive tendencies, the wilful ignorance). But in fact the barbaric element in her poetry, however quaint, however much it manifests Dickinson's personality, is a failure both of plainness and of art. Among the reasons for this are her frequent disregard for the customary use of language, which Ben Jonson defines in *Discoveries*:

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[31] Santayana speaks of Emerson's habit of worship and his engrossment with imagination in "Emerson," *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 228-29. They are the "two forces," he claims, that may be said to have carried Emerson toward mysticism.

> Custom is the most certain mistress of language, as the public stamp makes the current money. But we must not be too frequent with the mint, every day coining, not fetch words from the extreme and utmost ages; since the chief virtue of a style is perspicuity, and nothing so vicious in it as to need an interpreter. . . . But the eldest of the present and newest of the past language is the best. For what was the ancient language, which some men so dote upon, but the ancient custom? Yet when I name custom, I understand not the vulgar custom; for that were a precept no less dangerous to language than life, if we should speak or live after the manners of the vulgar; but that I call custom of speech which is the consent of the learned; as custom of life, which is the consent of the good. (572)

As Mitchell Breitwieser has argued, "Whitman wanted his poems to foster the illusion of conversational intimacy—the sense of a shared moment between Americans" (131). Thus section 51 of "Song of Myself":

> Listener up there! what have you to confide in me?
> Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
> (Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)
> . . . .
> Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with
> his supper?
> Who wishes to walk with me?

Whitman's charm is in his vulgarity (in the best sense of the word), though he often offends against custom of speech in coining words and using foreign terms. Dickinson, on the other hand, often offends against perspicuity and seems "to need an interpreter." Her poems display an unrelenting devotion to brevity and to form, but they often lack clarity without even offering enough surface brilliance in its place. Brevity and clarity are, of course, the two most important qualities that have traditionally made for plainness. When Dickinson is clear she is plain, for she is among the briefest of stylists. But even when she is not clear her manner proximates plainness. Whether her poems are marked by a hopeless obscurity or by a striking turn of speech, plainness can still be felt, like an attendant lingering nearby; it is as much a part of her poetry, one surmises, as her more reasonable Calvinist forebears might have expected.

Dickinson, of course, was not herself a Calvinist, though she may be said to have been Calvinistic in temperament. She in fact appears ultimately to have been unable to sustain belief in any sort of Christian orthodoxy, even though some of her poems endorse the beliefs of her forebears. In many poems, she retained the language of theology:

> The sweetest heresy received
> That man and woman know:
> Each other's convert,
> Though the faith accommodate but two.
>
> The churches are so frequent,
> The ritual so small,
> The Grace so unavoidable,
> To fail is infidel. (#387)[32]

and some of the old concerns of the Protestant theologians:

> Superiority to fate
> Is difficult to learn.
> 'Tis not conferred by any,
> But possible to earn
>
> A pittance at a time,
> Until, to her surprise,
> The soul with strict economy

---

[32] All quotations from the poems are numbered for easy reference to Thomas H. Johnson's edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955). However, punctuation and capitalisation have been normalised, and *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1939), edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, have been consulted in the process. When different versions of the same poem have been available, the latter text has usually been preferred.

Subsists till Paradise. (#1081)

A triumph may be of several kinds.
There's triumph in the room
When that old imperator, Death,
By faith is overcome.

. . . .

Severer triumph, by himself
Experienced, who can pass
Acquitted from that naked bar,
Jehovah's countenance! (#455)

Given in marriage unto thee,
Oh, thou celestial host!
Bride of the Father and the Son,
Bride of the Holy Ghost!

Other betrothal shall dissolve,
Wedlock of will decay;
Only the keeper of this seal
Conquers mortality. (#817)

Safe in their alabaster chambers,
Untouched by morning and untouched by noon,
Sleep the meek members of the resurrection,
Rafter of satin, and roof of stone. (ll. 1-4, #216)

Renunciation, fear of death, fear of the Father, resurrection, salvation—these are subjects that recur in the poems. But as representative of her style and concerns as what might be called the poems of belief are those of the skeptical, even disbelieving, despairing Dickinson:

Heaven is what I cannot reach!
The apple on the tree,
Provided it do hopeless hang,
That "heaven" is, to me.

The color on the cruising cloud,
The interdicted ground
Behind the hill, the house behind—
There paradise is found! (#239)

At least to pray is left, is left.
O Jesus! in the air

I know not which my chamber is—
I'm knocking everywhere.

Thou stirrest earthquake in the South,
And maelstrom in the sea;
Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth,
Hast thou no arm for me? (#502)

I never felt at home below,
And in the handsome skies
I shall not feel at home I know,
I don't like Paradise.

Because it's Sunday all the time
And recess never comes,
And Eden'll be so lonesome
Bright Wednesday afternoons.

If God could make a visit,
Or ever took a nap—
So not to see us—but they say
Himself a telescope

Perennial beholds us,—
Myself would run away
From Him and Holy Ghost and All—
But—there's the Judgment Day! (#413)

Of course I prayed—
And did God care?
He cared as much
As on the air
A bird had stamped her foot
And cried "Give me!"

My reason, life
I had not had,
But for Yourself.
'Twere better charity
To leave me in
The atom's tomb,
Merry and nought
And gay and numb,
Than this smart misery. (#376)

(There is, too, the occasional downright irreverent poem, such as "'Heavenly Father,' take to thee" [#1461], in which humankind apologises to God for His "own duplicity," and "Abraham to kill him" [#1317], in which God is likened to a mastiff.) Thus, just as she sometimes borrowed theological language for secular ends (see "The sweetest heresy received"), she used the language and themes of Calvinism or, more generally, Christianity for intensely personal expressions of spiritual anguish that showed her to be without either the comfort of salvation or even of belief.

It has generally been accepted that the hymn book was the source of Dickinson's metres and rhythms. At least one distinguished scholar and metricist, J. V. Cunningham in *Emily Dickinson: Lyric and Legend* (1980), has cast a side glance at this conventionalism:

> That she wrote in those meters is true, and misleading. Much of English and American poetry, especially shorter poems, was written in iambic tetrameter and trimeter, occasionally trochaic, in rhymed quatrains and the Lady of Shallot stanza, with no suggestion of the hymn book, as is much of mine. (22)

It would be difficult to prove any direct influence of the hymn book on at least the secular poems; at the same time, if the diction and themes of many of the poems had theological sources, why not the metres and rhythms? As Cunningham informs us in "Sorting Out: The Case of Dickinson," she wrote "for the most part . . . in common (8686) and short (6686) meters" (*CE* 357). Whether or not we want to insist on the influence of the hymn book, one thing seems clear: Emily Dickinson lived with these metres constantly in her mind and likely acquired a *need* to put them to language, at least for a time or at various times. In satisfying this need—if that's what it was—there were created some of the wonders of the language. There were also created a great many poems interesting only because of their authorship, and a great many of these are disasters, mainly because of an inadequate attention to conventional usage, or custom of speech: the need had to this extent become a bad habit.

Moreover, Dickinson's habitual use of common metre and its variations demonstrates her basic traditionalism. This seemingly obvious point is worth stressing, given the recent predilection for seeing Dickinson's unconventionality as a proto-modernist rejection of tradition. Dickinson was, as Cunningham wonderfully shows in *Lyric and Legend*, of her time and place. But she wrote some poems—among them, "I read my sentence steadily" (#412), "'Twas warm at first like us" (#519), "The last night that she lived" (#1100), and "As imperceptibly as grief" (#1540)—that transcend time and place: such poems go untouched by the restrictions implicit in the term "modern." However, Dickinson *was* modern; that much we can see in her spiritually anguished verse alone. She was modern in her apparent inability to remain Christian, and in her sustained effort to cope with this fact, to bring her superb intelligence to bear on the problem of the difference between the modern world—being shaped anew by science and technology—and the Christian world of the recent past. Like all times, at least since the Renaissance, hers was a time of transition, and as the skeptical poems above indicate she was most aware of the problems posed by this transition for the divine poet, and her handling of them was often intensely personal in a modern way. This personal element might be traced back to Wordsworth, but each of the skeptical poems quoted above also looks forward: "Heaven is what I cannot reach!" is pre-Imagist; the doubt and the suggestive irony of "At least to pray is left, is left"—if it isn't more reminiscent of Blake—is as modern as the loss of Christianity as at least the obvious centre of our culture; "I never felt at home below," likewise, and with the particular interest of anticipating the objections raised by Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning" against the sameness of experience in paradise; and "Of course I prayed" has the bitterness toward an uncharitable or abandoning God that Thomas Hardy felt—it is also (to look in another direction) a quality of feeling similar to that of Existentialist writers responding to a universe bereft of God.

Dickinson's modernness is evident in what she says and how she says it. But being modern isn't the same as being modernist. It is a temptation felt and succumbed to by many recent commentators to see her unconventionalities as manifestations of her sloughing off the encasement of tradition, especially as represented by form. This phenomenon is no doubt due to the influence of such postmodern statements as "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" (itself an extension of Coleridge's "organic form") and "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open" (a curious statement, given its conventional syntax), the latter made by Charles Olson, the former attributed to Robert Creeley by Olson in his "Projective Verse" (16). R. P. Blackmur's criticism, in "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact" (1937), of Mrs. Bianchi's excuses for Dickinson's roughness still pretty well holds, and serves as a tonic to much recent sophistry:

> The idea is to make you feel that the slips and roughnesses, the truncated lines, false rhymes, the inconsistencies of every description which mar the majority of Emily Dickinson's poems are examples of a revolutionary master-craftsman. Only the idol is served here; no greater disservice could be done to the poetry the reader reads than to believe with however great sincerity that its blemishes have any closer relation than contrast to its beauty. Emily Dickinson never knew anything about the craft of verse to exemplify it, let alone revolt from it. (28)

The last sentence quoted is unfortunate on two counts. First, and most importantly, if Dickinson ever wrote a great poem (and she did), she must have exemplified a knowledge of the craft of verse adequate to the writing of great poetry. Second, the last clause might be interpreted as implying that to revolt from the craft of verse is more difficult than to exemplify it, which is doubtful in the extreme, and that to revolt one must be able to exemplify, which the history of free verse from Whitman up till this point in the twentieth century unfortunately refutes; but it is likely that such an interpretation goes beyond

Blackmur's intention. Some qualification of Blackmur's basic point, too, is probably necessary, some room made for the characteristic oddness of Dickinson that doesn't so much hinder some of the better poems as make them unique: sometimes the blemishes, or what appear to be blemishes, are intrinsic to the beauty. But Blackmur's insistence on seeing the failures for what they are is surely right.

The apparent modernness in matters of form and syntax is thus probably only apparent, Dickinson's quirks only quirks. Opposing views are often marked by their own quirkiness—odd premises, an inadequate regard for historical context, lack of definition and of exemplification. The "seems" of the following statement by Agnieszka Salska in *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness* (1985) belies a lack of convincing evidence, as well as an unargued assumption about truth, and a positively beguiling equation of truth and form:

> It seems that with years the poetic process became more and more important for Dickinson—more vital, in fact, than its destination, the truth of the finished poem. This is as much as to say that the essence of the total work is quest, regardless of the fact that it can never be completed since there is no final truth, no final form to be reached. Similarly, Whitman's final truth always recedes beyond the horizon. Consequently, what matters for both artists is the journey itself, the effort of consciousness. Like Emerson, Whitman and Dickinson sanctify the creative process rather than worship the finished form. (28)

The "consequently" is altogether too swiftly reached. The statement, "there is no final truth" is odd because it fails to account for Dickinson's overwhelming concern for what we can know, or for definition, and therefore tells us more about Salska than Dickinson. The statement is also odd because of what appears to be its unargued relativism, which Dickinson would not have endorsed; but its apposition with "no final form" is odder. Truth and form are not equatable, nor are they abstractions of the same realm. There is a further oddity in

Salska's having set up an opposition between "poetic process" and "the truth of the finished poem" in the first sentence, and then moving to that between "creative process" and "finished form" in the last. (Does she mean by "finished" *polished*, or merely *completed*, or both?) For, looking at the second part of each conjunction, there has been a shift from "truth" to "form." This is in keeping with the confusion already mentioned, but consistency is not in itself a virtue. And the rhetoric of the last sentence is conspicuously bad.

Salska's purpose appears to have been to substantiate the postmodern valuation of process over the use of traditional forms, whose association with truth, if not their equation, is understandable. Because of the fragmentary nature of many of the poems, the argument for "process" over "finishedness" will appeal to many. But such an argument as Salska's, which is about the development ("It seems that with years . . . ") of Dickinson's artistic values, would have to rely on a chronological ordering of the poems. However, Thomas H. Johnson's contribution to our understanding of their order is far from definitive. Such an argument would also have to account for those poems—at least those purportedly written in the later years—that are finished in the full sense of the word. It would seem to be an impossible task, and so the argument as Salska offers it lacks conclusive evidence; she seems to have succumbed, as Blackmur wondered if he himself hadn't succumbed, "to the temptation of a bright idea, which like the idea of chance explains less and less the more you look into it" (34).

The importance of finish to Dickinson can be seen in her customary use of traditional forms and in her preoccupation with defining. Even a random selection of poems such as either of those made above (the selections there are random insofar as they were not made for the present purpose) shows her typical use of traditional forms. Seven of the nine poems and passages quoted are in common metre; one, "Safe in their alabaster chambers," is in an approximation of iambic pentameter (at least in the version quoted); and one, "Of course I prayed," is iambic dimeter with three trimeter lines. In the nine selections, there are several lines whose lengths fall short of or exceed the norm, a few of these inexplicably so, for they needn't have done—they are Dickinsonian quirks. And there appears to be no significance in this or in the breaking down of the pentameter (a form she seldom used, never with much success) or in the stretching out into trimeter. In other words, these various digressions from the norm established in each poem do not function in a meaningful way. But there *is* a norm. Moreover, Dickinson uses form *whatever* she has to say—whether she expresses conventional views (those endorsing Church doctrine), or divergent views (as in the despairing and the irreverent poems). What counts most with her, though, as with Crabbe and professedly with Wordsworth and Whitman, is her meaning, or matter—another word for it is truth. In her most successful poems, form functions, as it always does in such poems, as an artistic means by which truth is realised; in the least successful, form—whether it remains intact or not—fails to fulfil its function, even though the realisation of truth may have been intended.

It is difficult to talk about the intentions of a poet whose work was left as dishevelled as Dickinson's. However, if we accept the elementary proposal that some poems are better than others and attempt to determine which, it should be possible to derive a fairly clear understanding of the intentions implicit in the better poems. It is clear from both her good and bad poems, however, that Dickinson attempted to write definitively; or, as Greg Johnson puts it in *Emily Dickinson: Perception and the Poet's Quest* (1985), hers was a "quest for essential truths," "an epistemological quest" (4, 6). If this is correct, then form must have been important to Dickinson whatever roughnesses the poems have, for form makes for the finished, and the finished is the definitive. An opposing view, put more forthrightly than that of Salska above, is expressed by David Porter in his sophisticated book, *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (1981). Porter likes to speak of "extinguishings of meaning" (225) in the poems, of "the estrangement from outer reality and the resistance of common words to definitive meaning" (226), of Dickinson's having "selected syllables of great power that stun, of momentary insight but finally of a combined meaninglessness as vast and dazzling as the sounding world itself" (243). These observations, of course, address the condition of a good many poems and fragments; the difficult thing would have been to identify and account for the few great poems among the many. What, too, about the meaningful poems and fragments that make up the vast majority? But Porter is preoccupied with the failures for failure's sake:

> . . . Dickinson's habitual brevity seems modern in its glimpses and incompleteness. These are notes raised to literature, notation as authentic response. Wayward in punctuation, the poems disregard nicety and neglect finish. They have an aura of spontaneity and the status of randomness which, as when we look at impressionist or action painting, we find congenial and not a counterfeiting of sensation and reality. Like Hardy, but apparently less knowingly, her poetry was revolutionary because it avoided the jeweled line. It was more a making of the irregular line through a rough simplicity and by drastic reduction. (225-26)

Brevity that makes for mere glimpses and incompleteness, waywardness in punctuation (at least according to the versions offered by Thomas H. Johnson), the neglect of finish, the old Romantic theory of spontaneity and the more recent and related postmodern theory of randomness, the appreciation of the irregular at the expense of the regular—all argue the apparent modernness of Dickinson but with a wilful neglect of historical context and the existence of the finished among what Cunningham concisely calls "the mass and mess of the collected poems" (*CE* 356).

But Porter is more or less right when he says that Dickinson "avoided the jeweled line" (though there is nothing "revolutionary" about either her poetry or Hardy's), and the terms "habitual brevity," "rough simplicity," and "drastic reduction" all point to truths. The jeweled is the ornamental, and even when Dickinson's mind turned to figurative language (in the serious poems) it was with a characteristic attentiveness to meaning; the ornamental, or decorative, was not her forte.[33] Hence, that attentiveness tends not to result in elaborate and extended figurative exploits like those of Donne, but in modest and compact ones. But occasionally her purposes are purely or almost purely imagistic:

Where ships of purple gently toss

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[33] There are, though, a number of ornate poems, especially amongst the nature poems. Sunsets in particular drew Dickinson toward the elaborate and ornamental:

She sweeps with many colored brooms
And leaves the shreds behind—
Oh housewife in the evening west,
Come back, and dust the pond!

You dropped a purple ravelling in,
You dropped an amber thread,
And now you've littered all the east
With duds of emerald!

And still she plies her spotted brooms,
And still the aprons fly,
Till brooms fade softly into stars—
And then I come away. (#219)

This is still modest, however; the modesty of the domestic figure, the simplicity of the diction and syntax camouflage well the essential ornateness of the endeavour. Number 228, on the other hand, is less modest:

Blazing in gold and quenching in purple,
Leaping like leopards to the sky,
Then at the feet of the old horizon
Laying her spotted face to die.

Stooping as low as the otter's window,
Touching the roof and tinting the barn,
Kissing her bonnet to the meadow—
And the juggler of day is gone.

The first line especially has all the moral insubstantiality of jewelry. The poem starts out boldly ornate, but then becomes plainer in a Dickinsonian way.

On seas of daffodil,
Fantastic sailors mingle,
And then—the wharf is still. (#265)

The image consists of a simple metaphor composed of four components, or sub-metaphors, and the poem is successful within its limits. In a poem such as this the success lies not in attentiveness to meaning (for this is a poem without commentary, although there is some slight but indefinite suggestiveness to the word "still") but in the compatibility of metaphor and subject, or vehicle and tenor: in this case, the ships of purple, seas of daffodil, fantastic sailors, and the wharf attain a satisfactory degree of rightness as a description of a swarm of insects dancing before the sunset. The conception made for precision, but the precision is limited to an image, a perception.

If there is precision, is there plainness? There isn't in the sense of either the native or the classical plain styles of the English Renaissance, primarily because there is no moral content (unless, that is, we perceive a burden of meaning in "still"). But then again Renaissance poets were not much concerned with the image, and never purely for its own sake; like Whitman, Dickinson occasionally was. Thus the "truth" of a precise imagistic poem is in the rightness of the presentation; the "matter" is, as with the plain stylists of the Renaissance, of first importance, but the matter is essentially without meaning, except in that such poems themselves say, usually implicitly, that the poet's business is the making of language photographs or pictures, because existence is, beyond the range of the particular, essentially meaningless. The poet has glimpsed the abyss. But such poems are, it might be objected, fundamentally figurative, not plain. However, even in as unambitious a poem as the one above, plainness, not figurativeness or ornateness or decorativeness, has more to do with both the motive (the depiction of the insects against the sunset) and the effect (the sense of rightness, or precision).

Representative poems of the native plain style and of the classical plain style, too, can be decidedly figurative ("Tichborne's Elegy" and Jonson's "How He Saw Her," from *A Celebration of Charis* are examples). Figurative language does not necessarily obviate plainness, for the manifestations of the principle are varied. Lawrence A. Sasek points to this fact in *The Literary Temper of the English Puritans* (1969), when he says that one cannot

> simply dismiss puritan style with the comment that a bare, unadorned style, eschewing literary devices, was the puritan norm. The statements quoted and paraphrased indicate a 'plain style' was a universal ideal, but that the term meant different things to different preachers and writers, and that only a few construed it to mean a style that ignored all literary techniques and avoided all rhetorical devices. If these few are considered atypical, the puritans appear to have held a complex theory of style which few ever explained logically. It was not a homogeneous or clearly defined theory, nor even a combination of theories. One can best describe it as a notion of the proper way to achieve the ideal of instructing and motivating the hearers and readers, a notion which the ideal of clarity and the respect for the beauty and usefulness of literary arts were joined in an undefined and rather vague relation, neither in harmony nor discord, but in a taut bond which pulled the writer toward one or the other at various times. The apparently conflicting statements found among the writers and within the works of each of several individuals are best explained by differences in emphasis. (55)

Thus Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* :

> To speak plainly was not primarily to speak simply, and not at all to speak artlessly. It meant speaking the Word—making language itself, as self-expression, an *imitatio Christi* because it conformed to scripture. The too well-known admonition that introduces the *Bay Psalm Book*, "God's altar needs not our polishings," far from curbing the use of image and metaphor, opens the full linguistic richness of the Old Testament to preacher and layman alike. (29)

As we have seen, Dickinson far from restricted herself to revealing the truth of the scriptures; still, she was very much concerned with truth, her expressions of which were sometimes public and general, sometimes private and particular. Moreover, there were precedents—scriptural, sermonical, and poetical—available to her in which writers claimed primarily to be concerned with plainness but used figurative devices in the process of discovering or conveying the truth.

This historical context helps to explain one of Dickinson's poems about the art of poetry; it is perhaps her most important:

> Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
> Success in circuit lies;
> Too bright for our infirm delight
> The truth's superb surprise.
>
> As lightning to the children eased
> With explanation kind,
> The truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind. (#1129)

Celebrants of the apparently modern or postmodern, of the formless, the meaningless, and the strange have nothing to go on here. The telling it "slant" might entice to contortive arguments against universals and absolutes, but, alas, the antecedent for "it" is "truth." It is tempting to see in "slant" an allusion to rhyme, but the earliest usage of "slant-rhyme" cited by the *OED* at least is 1944. The word clearly refers, though, to Dickinson's figurative practice, as for instance in the second stanza above or in whole poems like "Because I could not stop for Death" (#712), "I started early, took my dog" (#520), the intensely obscure "I felt a funeral in my brain" (#280), and even in poems whose purpose is primarily imagistic, like "Where ships of purple gently toss" (above) or "I taste a liquor never brewed" (#214).

Even so, this is not Dickinson's only method, and among the "slanted" poems and passages there are varying degrees of obliquity. The first two lines of the following poem are exceedingly plain, even banal; and lines 2 to 4 are, because of the indefinite article, a little odd:

> Of this is day composed:
> A morning and a noon,
> A revelry unspeakable,

And then a gay unknown
Whose pomps allure and spurn
And dower and deprive,
And penury for glory
Remedilessly leave. (#1675)

With "revelry" the poem shifts from banal language to a controlled, if not immediately clear, figure of speech; with "gay unknown" we become aware that the definition of "day" offered here is primarily figurative, more specifically, metonymic: "day"=life; "revelry unspeakable"=sunset and the inexpressible, because unknowable, experience of death; and "gay unknown"=utter darkness and that which follows death. ("Revelry" and "gay" are thus unconvincing insofar as they purport to describe the unknowable.) The syntax of the last two lines is Dickinson at her worst. It makes the inversions of lines 1 and 3 innocuous in comparison and may have resulted from an over-fondness for (the metrically appropriate) "Remedilessly," or from a desire for the near rhyme ("deprive" / "leave"), or from both. The poem is far from being amongst Dickinson's best, but the obliquity makes for a useful form of shorthand; it is figurative without being ornamental, and clarity is threatened not so much by the figure as by the awkward syntax.

Some poems and passages, though, are not figurative but bare, direct statements. But whether figurative or not, the poems are relentless in their pursuit of definition. J. V. Cunningham, in "Several Kinds of Short Poem" (1964), explains that there are poems of "memoir," or particular experiences, that lay claim to definitiveness: "[t]he aim becomes not so much definitive statement as the asseveration under oath that this is exactly the way it was, in fact and feeling." Dickinson wrote such poems, some of which will be considered shortly. But she also wrote many poems whose purpose was definitive statement:

> The characteristic poem motivated by a concern for definitive statement, however, will be the poem that explains—an expository poem, a statement in the ordinary sense of that word. And it will be short, for the concern for definitiveness is a prejudice for brevity. If one has said something definitively he will not be impelled to amplify, to say it again undefinitively. So the poet who holds this view becomes an epigrammatist. (*CE* 432)

This speaks for much of Cunningham's own poetry, and for a tradition older than Martial. Many of Dickinson's poems announce an epigrammatist that might have been. These poems are written not in the epigrammatic ways of Jonson, of Pope, or of Cunningham, but in distinctly her own way, working the hymnal form, or, more simply, common metre, into a sometimes rigorously expository medium. Good expository verse has similar claims to plainness as good prose; hence, there is something to Porter's more or less off-handed comment that Dickinson faced elemental questions "with unabashed plainness" (159):

> Love is anterior to life,
> Posterior to death,
> Initial of creation, and
> The exponent of breath. (#917)

It should perhaps be mentioned that the accent in "exponent" comes on the first syllable; the line, like the rest of the poem, is regular. This has a gnomic plainness that is not banal or at all flat. The definition of love depends upon the simple copula, as is most common in Dickinson, and there is an assured handling of abstraction in the process of attempting to define the universal. This assurance and the control of the metre are such that the ending of line 3 with "and" is not the failing it usually is in poetry, and seems almost to be a strength in that it sets up the cleverness and closure of the last line. Love, the last line tells us, explains "breath" (life, but also living); it is the power that sustains human life, or the root of the power that is human life: there is a reciprocal relation between love and life.

The poem is, furthermore, an example of the almost finished. "But what is the finished?" Cunningham asks, and answers:

> It is, of course, the complete. The beginning will be a given, but the end must be an apparent end. Furthermore, no word, phrase, aspect shall challenge alteration; the choices have been made and are not to be reopened. It is, however private its origin, public in expression, in idiom common. It must be correct, though not necessarily of a schoolmarm's correctness. There must be no sense of strain, but an accomplished easiness. The ingenious and the virtuoso, though locked in tight completeness, are not the finished. In brief, it must give an unanalyzed conviction of just-rightness, and it must be something better than good.
>
> Hence formality is an indispensable element in the finished. Symmetrical pattern, exact meter and rhyme lay claim to it; they are by nature clinchers. It follows that if there is a taste for the unfinished, inexactness may become in itself a virtue, or it may suggest the value of the open as opposed to the closed, freedom instead of constraint, or finally the variations may be linked with other aspects and found significant. So it is thought to be with Dickinson, but it is not so. (*CE* 356-57)

"Love is anterior to life" stands, then, as proof of Dickinson's concern for the finished, and for the definitive, rather than as an example of the finished. For despite what has been said in defense of line 3 it does end with "and"; despite the compactness of the last two lines there is the failure to bring about the expected balance achieved in the first two; and, despite the careful selection and handling of words, the more appropriate word "creation" in line 3 might take the place of "life" in line 1, and there is redundancy in "life" and "breath" (although Johnson has the inferior "Earth" for this last). We have already seen a poem that is even less finished in Cunningham's definitive sense, but even "Of this is day composed," with its effort to define, its near rhymes, careful diction, and dogged metre, reveals a distinct concern for the finished, as do poorer poems in the canon:

> If tolling bell I ask the cause.
> "A soul has gone to God,"
> I'm answered in a lonesome tone;
> Is heaven then so sad?

That bells should joyful ring to tell
A soul had gone to heaven
Would seem to me the proper way
A good news should be given. (#947)

This version comes from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1939), edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson; the version given by Johnson in *The Complete Poems* is equally poor. This is Dickinson on a bad day. As either of the two versions clearly indicates and a comparison of them confirms, she was uncertain of her material; she was of two minds. Still, despite the bad grammar and the general feebleness, there is a residue of the finished, if of a schoolmarmish variety. Even in the unfinished there is usually ample evidence of a vital interest in the finished; achieving the unfinished was not an intention of Dickinson's but the failure of an intention.

Whatever else the famous sewn "packets" might be, they are suggestive of, if not exactly an epigrammatist, at least a minimalist at work. A substantial number of the poems fit Raymond Oliver's recent description of a certain kind of poem:

Coffeehouse Poems

This is the sort
Of poem to write
On envelopes:
Very few tropes,
Extremely tight,
Extremely short. (Barth 18)

This is indubitably plain in style, expository in nature. It is a definition and example of very brief epigrammatic statements in the tradition of the classical plain style. Every syllable contributes to the plainness of the statement. It is plain in structure, syntax, diction, and figure. It is classical in its clever, confident, self-reflexive insight, humour, and finish, in its invitation to agreement; it is, in a word, urbane. Because of the subject, it is perhaps more restrained in feeling than is usual in poems in this style, and the moral content (it is, after all, a statement on the art of *this* kind of poetry) is similarly limited. These forms of restraint do not, however, reflect negatively on the poem. They are, on the contrary, wholly appropriate to the style, necessary to the poet's purpose. Many of Dickinson's poems fit the description in Oliver's epigram but lack the urbanity. They have behind them similar convictions but are usually more figurative and rougher-hewn. Oliver, though, is a distinguished epigrammatist and medieval scholar, as well as a translator of poetry in Greek, Latin, and at least two modern languages; Dickinson was not. And Oliver has used the classical tradition of Rome and the English Renaissance as a model; Dickinson did not. But the way in which many of her poems are typically concerned with definition and with finish is reminiscent of the native plain style, which Yvor Winters describes in *Forms of Discovery* (1968):

> The characteristics of the typical poem of the school are these: a theme usually broad, simple, and obvious, even tending toward the proverbial, but usually a theme of some importance, humanly speaking; a feeling restrained to the minimum required by the subject; a rhetoric restrained to a similar minimum, the poet being interested in his rhetoric as a means of stating his matter as economically as possible, and not, as are the Petrarchans, in the pleasures of rhetoric for its own sake. There is also a strong tendency toward aphoristic statement, many of the best poems being composed wholly of aphorisms, or, if very short, being composed as single aphorisms. . . .
>
> The wisdom of poetry of this kind lies not in the acceptance of a truism, for anyone can accept a truism, at least formally, but in the realization of the truth of the truism: the realization resides in the feeling, the style. Only a master of style can deal in a plain manner with obvious matter: we are concerned with the kind of poetry which is perhaps the hardest to compose and the last to be recognized, a poetry not striking nor original as to subject, but merely true and universal, that is, in a sense, commonplace; not striking nor original in rhetorical procedure, but economical and efficient; a poetry which permits itself originality, that is, the breath of life, only in the most restrained subtleties of diction and of cadence, but which by virtue of those subtleties inspires its universals with their full value as experience. (3-4)

That some of the characteristics of this style also fit the classical style is to be expected: they are both plain styles. Thus the feeling and rhetoric of Oliver's poem seem similar to the minimalisations in the following piece of advice from George Turberville (1540?-1595?); the metre is identical:

To One That Had Little Wit

I thee advise
If thou be wise
To keep thy wit
Though it be small:
'Tis rare to get
And far to fet,
'Twas ever yit
Dearest ware of all. (Williams 106)

Nevertheless, the primary differences are in feeling and rhetoric. Although both poems are didactic, the Oliver is indirectly so, the poet being at least as interested in creating a subtle, intimate voice as in teaching us something about poetry. The Turberville, on the other hand, is didactic in an obvious way, lacking the subtlety and urbanity of the Oliver, though it has an ironic tone. Likewise, it is forthrightly moral, as poems in the native style, let alone poems of advice in the native style, are wont to be (see, for example, Ralegh's "The Lie" or "Sir Walter Ralegh to His Son" [Williams 127-29, 130]), and though it is personal it is not intimate. Both poems are very short and state their matter concisely and with perfect clarity and "very few tropes." These similarities and the identical form notwithstanding, there are small but significant differences in diction, syntax, and rhythm. "Advise," "wise," "wit," and "dearest ware" are typical of the native style, as are the slightly awkward and archaic idioms "rare to get" and "far to fet," while "'Twas ever yit" is redundant and forced for rhyme's sake. The diction of the Oliver is, in contrast, unmarked; there is nothing distinctive or forced about it; it is representative of what Cunningham calls the "noticeably unnoticeable style"

(*CE* 322). The syntax is similarly unnoticeable, but it might be noted that the first three lines are enjambed, thus making one syntactical unit, while the last three constitute a syntactical unit each. Thus Oliver says four things about coffeehouse poems in the twenty-four syllables of his six lines. Turberville almost seems bombastic in comparison, though his poem is written in a plain, not a bombastic, style. He too says four things, if we exclude the redundant "Though it be small" (a piece of information we already have from the title): "keep thy wit," for it is "rare to get," "far to fet," and the "dearest ware of all." The poem, though, is two lines longer than Oliver's, depends on three contractions (including "dearest," which should be read "dear'st"), and, as far as what it says goes, could be at least three lines shorter. Moreover, it lacks the syntactical flexibility of Oliver's poem, for the eight lines make seven syntactical units; the line endings are distinct endings, so much so that the technically run-over, or enjambed, seventh line maintains considerable integrity. It is likewise rigid in rhythm, the degree of difference between unstressed and stressed syllables almost uniform. Oliver's rhythm is a far suppler and subtler instrument; it perfectly complements the flexibility of the diction and syntax. That it is possible to say this of such short lines in such a short poem is indicative of the range of subject and tone and the degree of precision possible in the classical plain style.

Many of Dickinson's poems have an affinity with the style in which Turberville wrote. This affinity is rooted in her moralising, the tone of which Winters nicely describes as "immitigably Calvinistic in its hard and direct simplicity" (*IDR* 298). Hard and direct simplicity is not, of course, restricted to Calvinists or those of Calvinistic heritage. Such simplicity is evident in "To One That Had Little Wit," as it is in the following lines by other poets of the sixteenth century. The first two quotations are from John Skelton (1460?-

1529), probably the most medieval of sixteenth-century poets in tone and roughness of line; the third is by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542), who did not always write with a hard and direct simplicity; and the fourth is an entire poem by Barnabe Googe (1540-1594), whose diction, Alan Stephens writes in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* (1961), becomes "[a]t strategic points . . . cleanly literal and plain," so as to achieve "a modulated power and hard clarity not available to any other kind of writing" (17):

Upon a Dead Man's Head

Your ugly token
My mind hath broken
From worldly lust:
For I have discussed
We are but dust,
And die we must.
   It is general
To be mortal:
I have well espied
No man may him hide
From death hollow-eyed,
With sinews wydered,
With bones shydered,
With his worm-eaten maw,
And his ghastly jaw
Gasping aside,
Naked of hide,
Neither flesh nor fell. (ll. 1-18, Williams 4)

To Mistress Anne

Mistress Anne,
I am your man,
As you may well espy.
If you will be
Content with me,
I am your man.

But if you will
Keep company still
With every knave that comes by,
Then you will be
Forsaken of me,
That am your man.

But if you fain,

I tell you plain,
If I presently shall die,
I will not such
As loves too much,
That am your man. (ll. 1-18, Williams 7)

What Should I Say

What should I say
  Since faith is dead,
And truth away
  From you is fled?
  Should I be led
With doubleness?
Nay, nay, mistress! (ll. 1-7, Williams 32)

Of Money

Give money me, take friendship whoso list,
For friends are gone come once adversity,
When money yet remaineth safe in chest,
That quickly can thee bring from misery;
Fair face show friends when riches do abound;
Come time of proof, farewell, they must away;
Believe me well, they are not to be found
If God but send thee once a lowering Day.
Gold never starts aside, but in distress,
Finds ways enough to ease thine heaviness. (Williams 101)

The martyrs of #792 include those Protestants persecuted in the sixteenth century; the self-assured simplicity of statement and tone and the degree of finish befit the subject:

Through the straight pass of suffering
The martyrs even trod,
Their feet upon temptation,
Their faces upon God.

This, the first of three stanzas, is just slightly short of polished, but polish here, as in the selections from Skelton, might seem beside the point. The "martyr poets" of #544 indicate Dickinson's sense of a continued tradition; again, subject, diction, and lack of polish suggest poetic principles similar to those of the native plain style poets:

The martyr poets did not tell,

But wrought their pang in syllable,
That when their mortal name be numb,
Their mortal fate encourage some. (stanza 1 of two)

The imperfect first rhyme is weak, but the strength of the perfect second is lessened by the imprecision of "numb." It is not simply the lack of polish that makes for the similarity between Dickinson and these other poets, for many a rhymer of the nineteenth century, and of the twentieth, might be said to lack polish and yet have nothing of note in common with the poets quoted. It is, rather, the lack of polish in conjunction with a weighty moral subject matter and tone that almost defies polish (even though the selections from Wyatt and Googe seem polished in comparison with those from Skelton).

The "hard and direct simplicity" of each of the selections from the sixteenth century is only evident in traces in the last two passages from Dickinson, but elsewhere in the poems this characteristic can be found in abundance, as can the kind of thwarting of conventions and expectations that Googe is revealed as a master of in "Of Money":[34]

I like a look of agony,
Because I know it's true;
Men do not sham convulsion,
Nor simulate a throe.

The eyes glaze once, and that is death.
Impossible to feign
The beads upon the forehead
By homely anguish strung. (#241)

This unusual poem is similar to the passage from "Upon a Dead Man's Head" in three respects: first, it begins with a personal touch and moves into a more public form of expression; second, although there is this personal element the concerns of the poet are general rather than particular; and, third, the description is crude but accurate, the poet not interested in crudeness for its own sake. These qualities are essentially medieval, though Dickinson's poem is too distinctly her own in the extremity of its personal and peculiar concern for what we can know ever to be mistaken for a medieval poem or for one by any other poet. It also lacks a Christian context, which Skelton's poem has, though not explicitly in the lines quoted. But, like the poems by Oliver, Turberville, Wyatt, and Googe, these by Skelton and Dickinson are statements. In an extremely interesting scholarly work, *Poems Without Names: The English Lyric, 1200-1500* (1970), Raymond Oliver explains medieval poetic statements in a way that sheds light on the connection with Dickinson:

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[34] This thwarting, however, was based on an old tradition, which Googe brings to culmination. Polonius's advice to Laertes, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be, / For loan oft loses both itself and friend" (I iii 75-76), is in the same tradition, as is this jingle, quoted here from the Arden *Hamlet* but originally cited by Kittredge: "I had my silver and my friend, / I lent my silver to my friend, / I asked my silver of my friend, / I lost my silver and my friend." See the Longer Notes, 442.

> Since many of the poems are essentially statements, their virtues are often the same as the virtues of effective statement: clarity, precision, and concise forcefulness. Thus the best poems are commonly the shortest; they are graphic, definitive epigrams which select the most striking and characteristic traits of their subject. . . . Mortality is in fact the usual heavy weapon of these poets, though religious doctrine can supply as great or even greater force. . . . In any case, the most powerfully moving poems are usually eschatological; they are concerned with the *quator hominum novissima*—death, judgment, heaven, and hell.
>
> But the cliché is endemic to such poems because their subject matter is, at least in theory, finite and exhaustible, unlike the infinitely nuanced, private, psychological matter of recent poets. . . . How many ways are there to say that all of us will die and must therefore repent? . . . Perhaps the most that one can say is that the essence of good 'anonymous short poems' is shortness, as opposed to verbosity, and a spare, generalized anonymity, as opposed to a detailed subjectivism. (136)

Some of Dickinson's poems have "nuanced, private, psychological matter"; they are often distinctive, anything but anonymous, utterances; and it follows that some of these poems are, to some extent at least, subjective. But there are other poems or moments in poems that achieve the "clarity, precision, and concise forcefulness" of medieval poems of statement; they are graphic and definitive, and very often about mortality and religious doctrine (even if sometimes in rejection of it); and, though they are often figurative, the typical figures are concise forms of metaphor; and they are never, one should think, verbose but short, spare, and generalised.

There are, it is true, significant differences between Dickinson and the poets of the native plain style, not the least of which is in diction. Dickinson uses more words of Latin origin and probably more frequently, though it is interesting that these, as in "simulate" in line 4 of "I like a look of agony," are often self-consciously employed. "Vacillating" in the following poem works better; "ignited" is more successful than "simulate" above, but demands attention:

> Though the great waters sleep,
> That they are still and deep
> We cannot doubt.
> No vacillating God
> Ignited this abode
> To put it out. (#1599)

The question of doubt and the small matter of diction aside, this has a spareness, moral seriousness, and surety—despite the question of doubt—of statement and rhythm that can be found in poems of the sixteenth century and earlier. Although there is modification, it is sparing; although there are figures, they are modest, the first one, that the waters "sleep," even being a dead metaphor (you can't get more modest than dead). The poem is a simple statement, and it is essentially denotative. It is about on par with #1701:

> To this apartment deep
> No ribaldry may creep;
> Untroubled this abode
> By any man but God.

—and with #1287:

> In this short life
> That only lasts an hour
> How much, how little, is
> Within our power.

—which has a similar subdued tone of awe and bewilderment as

> Is it possible
> That so high debate,
> So sharp, so sore, and of such rate
> Should end so soon and was begun so late?
> Is it possible?

—which is the first stanza of a poem by Wyatt (Williams 25). And if there is often a distinctly modern or Dickinsonian theme or emphasis in the poems of statement, there are still many of the features—good and bad—of the native style:

> When I hoped I feared,
> Since I hoped I dared;
> Everywhere alone
> As a church remain;
> Spectre cannot harm,
> Serpent cannot charm;
> He deposes doom,
> Who hath suffered him. (#1181)

"Him" refers to hope personified. As Oliver says in his discussion of the structure of medieval lyrics, repetition "contributes to a sense of inevitability and truth" and "can also deepen an atmosphere of rare mystery. . . . Next to repetition, the most clear and obvious way to organize a poem is through some simplified form of logic" (8, 9). Both repetition and logic are at work here, and not even the repetition has anything modern about it.

As much as for the native plain stylists, mortality was Dickinson's great theme. There are poems of statement whose primary purpose is to define terms in a purely abstract way, like "Love is anterior to life," and those whose definitions of abstract terms rely on metaphors of a generalised sort:

> Remorse is memory awake,
> Her parties all astir,
> A presence of departed acts
> At window and at door. (#744, ll. 1-4)

But then there are those that are "cleanly literal and plain," that achieve a kind of "hard clarity," which Stephens speaks of in connection with Googe.

Perhaps the most successful of these poems are about death. And even those poems, such as "Because I could not stop for death" (#712), that are not "cleanly literal" but work by means of allegory or some other figurative device are clearly engaged in definition, and achieve a plainness comparable to that in these stanzas from "The Aged Lover Renounceth Love," by Thomas, Lord Vaux (1510-1556):

> The harbinger of death,
>   To me I see him ride;
> The cough, the cold, the gasping breath
>   Doth bid me to provide
>
> A pickaxe and a spade,
>   And eke a shrouding sheet,
> A house of clay for to be made
>   For such a guest most meet. (stanzas 7-8, Williams 46)

The figure of death personified is a cliché (though saying this is not to slight its use but merely to identify its nature), the details—the cough, cold, gasping breath, pickaxe, spade, and shroud—are literal rather than figurative, and appeal to general and public experience more than to particular and private, and the "house of clay" is a simple, homespun metaphor (which, of course, anticipates Dickinson's "house that seemed / A swelling of the ground" in #712). The effect of the figures and details is not to lessen the plainness of the poem, but to emphasise its moral purpose of renunciation. The hard clarity is the same as in "Upon a Dead Man's Head." It is found in the poet's impersonal attitude toward death; it is a result of the poet's public, didactic, moral purpose. Dickinson achieves the hard clarity of the saved Calvinist in the first stanza of #384:

> No rack can torture me,
> My soul's at liberty.
> Behind this mortal bone
> There sits a bolder one . . . .

This would appear to have its source of feeling in a medieval New England revivalism, were such a thing possible. Matters of form aside, it might have come from Whitman; rather than definitive, it is merely definite. Dickinson's hard clarity is most successful when the goal of definitiveness is clearly before her.

It is clearly before her in #305, but the hard clarity is refined into a distinguished conceptual and perceptual methodology:

> The difference between despair
> And fear, is like the one
> Between the instant of a wreck,
> And when the wreck has been.
>
> The mind is smooth—no motion—
> Contented as the eye
> Upon the forehead of a bust,
> That knows it cannot see.

The poem is organised rationally. It works by means of two similes: the first attempts to define the difference between despair and fear, and the second modifies the descriptive terms ("The mind is smooth—no motion— / Contented") used to define the state the mind is in following a wreck. The central purpose of the poem is thus to define despair, an important theme in many of Dickinson's poems, but the definition is complete here. The contentment is that of one resigned to hopelessness but unable to shake the habit or memory of hope; the eye knows that the bust cannot see, but a bust can give one the uncanny feeling that one's steady gaze is returned, that the fixity of stone is the fixity of concentrated perception. The image of the eye upon the forehead of a bust thus describes a slightly unsettled contentment, even though the mind is smooth, motionless; the image conveys the ironic intention of "contented." The image thus takes on a special significance. For we are invited to imagine the sensation one might have when looking at the forehead of a bust—the image says it's *that* kind of contentment. Sometimes, as Winters observed, Dickinson used what came to be known as the post-Symbolist image, and we have such an image here, though Winters appears to have thought otherwise (*FD* 272), no doubt because the image occurs in a passage of explanation. Insofar as the image, or description, is part of an explanation, it is of secondary importance to the statement that the poem makes. In its own right, however, the image is an embodiment of the special kind of contentment central to the definition of despair. In any case, in some poems the image is not secondary but of equal importance to the statement because it is intrinsic to the statement.

The hard clarity of #519 consists of a conceptual and perceptual concentration that results in one of her most nearly perfect poems:

'Twas warm at first like us,
Until there crept thereon
A chill, like frost upon a glass,
Till all the scene be gone.

The forehead copied stone,
The fingers grew too cold
To ache, and like a skater's brook
The busy eyes congealed.

It straightened—that was all.
It crowded cold to cold—
It multiplied indifference
As pride were all it could.

And even when with cords
'Twas lowered like a freight,
It made no signal, nor demurred,
But dropped like adamant.

The contraction with which the poem begins is probably the most meaningful of its kind in English poetry. It is not merely a metrical convenience; it is used, and it is a fitting opening to the intensity of language and experience realised in the poem. As Winters says, Dickinson "is constantly defining the absolute cleavage between the living and the dead" (*IDR* 290), and this poem defines that cleavage unforgettably and perhaps more vividly—more definitively—than any other poem of its kind. The definition adheres in large and small matters, from the extraordinary description to what is often (and everywhere in Dickinson's poems) a throw-away contraction. Winters also identifies the defects of the poem; they are typical of Dickinson, and often destroy her poems: "[t]he grammar in [line] twelve is barbarous, and in four we have an unduly forced subjunctive . . . ." It might be added, though, that the use of the subjunctive in line 4 is a poetic archaism that does not, at least, offend against perspicuity. The grammar of line 12, however, makes for momentary obscurity and hence damages the otherwise unimpaired plainness, which is of a sort attainable by clear, objective description, though there is more than this to the poem. Furthermore, the bad grammar of 12 is also obviously due to Dickinson's habitual effort to make what she has to say fit within her chosen form. At times, it is as if her character was such that she would doggedly hang on to her conception of the poetic, whether in matters of syntax or form, at the expense of clarity, a virtue that she nevertheless abundantly displays a devotion to in this and all of her good poems. A critical evaluation of her own work seems to have been beyond either her abilities or interests, or both. The presence of these defects in the work is like that of similar defects in poems of the native plain style: to the extent that they owe their existence to the difficulty of working with forms, they are usually, in the otherwise good poem, small blemishes typical of a writer, or a period, whose refinement and critical sensibility have for whatever reasons not quite come of age.

Like all of her very finest poems, "'Twas warm at first like us" displays Dickinson's perceptual talent, which was of the rarest sort. She speaks of the process of perception in #1071:

Perception of an object costs

Precise the object's loss,
Perception in itself a gain
Replying to its price.

The object absolute is nought,
Perception sets it fair,
And then upbraids a perfectness
That situates so far.

The contrast in quality between this poem and the previous two is substantial. Still, the poem illustrates the importance to Dickinson of the modern preference for percepts in her effort to define experience. Our experience of the object is limited to our perception of it; we cannot partake of the object's existence. We can, however, profit from our perception of it; though the object itself in absolute terms might amount to nothing, or, we might wish to insist, to nothing significant (it is merely a particular in a universe of particulars), the process of perception, whether in verse or simply in the mind, can pay homage to the particular without attempting to interfere with its discreteness or damaging our own integrity, and without neglecting universals. This is a realist's understanding of experience, and it stands firmly against the Romantic doctrine of immersion, or fusion, endorsed, as we have seen, by Wordsworth and Whitman. However, the bad grammar of line 2, the redundancy (a common failing, by the way, among the native plain stylists) of 4, the flatness of 6, the primness of 7, and the obscurity of 7 and 8 enfeeble the poem. In 7 and 8, "a perfectness" is presumably upbraided by Perception either because of its reluctance to aid in the process of perception (that is, because of the inherent difficulty or even impossibility of perfect perception), or, perhaps, because "perfectness" means *idealism*, which would work insofar as it conflicts with the conception of reality defended in the poem, but which does not rescue the meaning of line 8.

In the third and fourth stanzas of #696, Dickinson appears to be speaking of her perceptual powers. The pleasure referred to in stanza 3 is the pleasure that accompanies understanding won by careful observation; the "house of supposition" in stanza 2 is heaven:

Their height in heaven comforts not,
Their glory nought to me;
'Twas best imperfect, as it was;
I'm finite, I can't see;

The house of supposition,
The glimmering frontier
That skirts the acres of perhaps,
To me shows insecure.

The wealth I had contented me;
If 'twas a meaner size,
Then I had counted it until
It pleased my narrow eyes

Better than larger values,
However true their show;
This timid life of evidence
Keeps pleading, "I don't know."

It is a poor poem, but, like "Perception of an object costs," it helps to explain Dickinson's poetic intentions (it also appears to be an affirmation of agnosticism). The desire to know led her to attempt to define human experience in poem after poem. And because her conceptual hold on reality prevented her from trying to merge with the objects of her perception, she was able in some few poems fully to realise her perceptual powers while at the same time commenting on the human significance of the experience conceived. Winters speaks at length about the occurrence of this phenomenon in poems by Dickinson and by other poets in Chapter 5 of *Forms of Discovery*. As was mentioned above, it is known as post-Symbolist imagery, and it occurs when "sense-perception and concept are simultaneous; there is neither ornament nor explanation, and neither is needed" (270). This phenomenon does not occur, by the way, in either of the last two poems quoted, but it occurs in "The difference between despair" and, as Winters points out, in "'Twas warm at first like us."

There is something, if not obviously plain about the method, at least similar to the intentions and effects of the classical plain style; moreover, there are different levels of style available to the poet who uses the method. One surmises that it ought to appeal, if by virtue of its economy alone, to any poet interested in plainness. Furthermore, it makes sense that it should have appealed to Dickinson, for the reasons already given, but also because she wrote at a time roughly two hundred years into the poet's developing concern with sense-perception.[35] Dickinson was of course unaware of the Symbolists, and almost certainly employed this imagery without ever having encountered it before. She appears to have exercised her inherent talent and her craft to the extent that they had the power to do what had apparently hitherto not been done. It is as if the method just came naturally, and there is a slender but strong connection between this natural development and puritanism, that inheritance that so influenced her life and work. Sasek's explanation of the presence of vividness in puritan sermons aids in seeing this connection:

> The preacher sought to arouse his audience to a consciousness of human sinfulness and God's mercy, and to move it to take action; hence the stress on the 'liveliness,' or vividness, of the spoken word. Whatever his theory of style might exclude, concreteness and the imagery of everyday life, with their immediacy and strength of effect, had to be part of his repertory. A completely bare, dull, bland style was simply beside the point. This the puritans seldom bothered to explain, and we can also take for granted that the term 'plain style' comprehended a measure of

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[35] The course of the poet's evolving concern with sense-perception basically extends from the seventeenth century up to today, and although there has been in recent years a significant movement in the United States among the so-called New Formalists back toward a poetry of ideas and of statement, there appears as yet to be no end in sight to the domination of this concern. A poem like Denham's "Cooper's Hill" (1668) figures as a kind of pre-historic ancestor to the modern poem of images for their own sake.

> vividness and color, not merely as seasoning, but as an integral, basic ingredient. (41)

Dickinson's ends were different from those sought by the preachers of her forefathers, but her concern with truth and her attempt to realise it by means of "concreteness and the imagery of everyday life" (though these were neither her nor the preacher's only means) were similar. In order to account for Dickinson's discovery of the imagery now known as post-Symbolist, we must look to her history, and there is a distinct possibility that the puritan world that so informed other aspects of her life and work also had a hand in this one.[36]

Sasek's description of the plain styles of the puritans as comprehending "a measure of vividness and color, not merely as seasoning, but as an integral, basic ingredient" is very similar to Winters' description of post-Symbolist imagery quoted above, and in this passage: "the visual and the intellectual are simultaneous—they cannot be separated in fact" (*FD* 252); and, at more length, here in his discussion of F. G. Tuckerman's emergence from using sensory details in an obscure way:

> The form of the emergence is as follows: the acute sensory perception remains, but instead of the simple elegiac theme which we get in some of Verlaine, in much of Heredia, and in the first two sonnets from Tuckerman from which I have quoted, instead of the obscurity which we find in Rimbaud, we have a theme of some intellectual scope with enough abstract statement to support the theme; theme and abstract statement charge the imagery with meaning, with the result that the imagery has the force of abstract statement. The imagery is not ornament as it would be in the Renaissance, nor is it merely pasturage for revery as in much of the poetry of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, nor is there anything obscure about its intention. (*FD* 259)

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[36] This is not to say that puritanism, or Calvinism, has been fundamental to the development of the method. The account given is meant only to suggest a possible source for Dickinson's use of the method.

The imagery of "'Twas warm at first like us," especially, as Winters says, in lines 8 through 11, bears the burden of meaning characteristic of the post-Symbolist method. Winters is perhaps in part mistaken, though, when he suggests that "the living becomes dead" in lines 8 and 9 (*FD* 269). Except for line 9, the entire poem is likely concerned with a dead body. The warmth of line 1 is that of the newly dead, and the congealing of the eyes in line 8 ("The busy eyes congealed") occurs just after death. This line may refer to the same event as line 5 of "I like a look of agony": "The eyes glaze once, and that is death." Indeed, the word "busy" might lead us to think that the very moment of death is depicted. But congealing, not glazing but real congealing, takes place some moments following death. "Busy" would therefore appear to refer to the activity of congealing, as well, perhaps, as to the eyes having just been busy in life. The "straightening" of line 9, however, presumably refers back to the very moment at which death occurred.

The most important similarity between the classical plain style and the post-Symbolist method is most easily expressed negatively: both lack ornamentation. The lack of ornamentation is not the bareness of argument found in the native plain style, nor is it T. S. Eliot's "bare bones" style,[37] nor the bareness of presentation insisted upon by Ezra Pound. What these various "plain styles" do have in common with the post-Symbolist method and with the classical plain style is a conscious avoidance of ornament (that Pound's brand of imagism arguably results in ornamental poetry is a consideration outside of the present concerns). What these other stylistic intentions do not share with the post-Symbolist method and the classical plain style is a use of details that is characterised by both subtlety and an acute attention to meaning. The subtlety is not only a matter of rhetoric but of form. The rhetoric of the native plain style, for instance, was based quite rigidly on formal patterns, especially the 4-6 line. Hence, although a poem like "Tichborne's Elegy" might employ figures subtly and be intensely meaningful, the poet has largely been concerned—however moving we find the poem—with fitting his matter into a formal pattern, that of the 4-6 line.[38] Poets of the classical plain style, and those who use the post-Symbolist method, may still have to meet the demands of form, but, freed at least from a predominant pattern, or formula, and having available to them (talent permitting) greater subtleties of rhythm than the native plain style permits, which involves degree of stress and syntactic rather than formal patterns, such poets have the freedom within form that comes of what Trimpi calls idiomatic purity (*BJP* 120-22). Post-Symbolism has thus profited not only from Symbolism but, like verse in English in general since the early seventeenth century, from the innovations in the use of the line that the advent of the classical plain style brought about. Thus this similarity between the classical plain style and the post-Symbolist method, their lack of ornamentation, can also be expressed positively, and in a way that probably excludes other plain styles. When concrete details (which may also be, but rarely, sensory details) do occur in a poem of the classical plain style, as in Jonson's "Inviting a Friend to Supper," or, in a modification of the style, in "My Picture Left in Scotland" or "Though beauty be the mark of praise," or in George Herbert's "Church Monuments," such details are fully used by the poet. As Winters would put it, the details are essential to the argument; they are not, as in the golden style of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ornamental. The same procedure, of course, is at work in the post-Symbolist method, and Winters' remark about the Renaissance in his explanation of the method (quoted above) should thus be duly qualified. For when he speaks of "imagery" he may not mean to include merely concrete details (the "falling temples," "withered garlands," and "altars kept from . . . decay" in "Though beauty be the mark of praise," for instance), but certainly would have included sensory details (Jonson's "mountain belly" and "rocky face" in "My Picture Left in Scotland," the title of which is significant in this connection, or the gradual prostration of tombstones in the third stanza of "Church Monuments," which is both figurative and visual).

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[37] The conclusion to this study will consider Eliot's "bare bones" style.

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[38] See Trimpi's discussion of "Tichborne's Elegy," *BJP* 121-22.

Post-Symbolist imagery occurs in most of Dickinson's very best poems, including "There's a certain slant of light" (#258), "The difference between despair" (#305), "'Twas warm at first like us" (#519), "Our journey had advanced" (#615), "Farther in summer than the birds" (#1068), "The last night that she lived" (#1100), "The Moon upon her fluent route" (#1528), and "As imperceptibly as grief" (#1540).[39] It sometimes occurs in two or three lines, as in these from "The last night that she lived"—

> Then lightly as a reed
> Bent to the water, shivered scarce,
> Consented, and was dead.

—or these from "Our journey had advanced": "Our pace took sudden awe, / Our feet reluctant led." The redundancy of the last line quoted is unfortunate, but the line does contain a post-Symbolist image. Also, although the line that precedes it is distinctly Dickinsonian in its positing that "pace" can "take" anything, it is superior in syntax, image, and thought to the second line, which, though good in itself, is thus valuable as a contrast. The contrast, too, extends to how the images work. Winters points out that in the post-Symbolist image abstract statement supports theme, that "theme and abstract statement charge the imagery with meaning." Thus the meaning of the image in "Our pace took sudden awe" is very much dependent on the gravity of the abstractions "Being" and "eternity" in stanza 1:

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[39] These poems are all conveniently grouped in *Quest for Reality*, the companion anthology to *Forms of Discovery*, edited by Yvor Winters and Kenneth Fields. The present discussion owes a great debt to both books.

Our journey had advanced;
Our feet were almost come
To that odd fork in Being's road,
Eternity by term.

But "awe," although there is almost something figurative about it because of Dickinson's brevity, is also an abstraction, and the line, "Our feet reluctant led" likewise contains both an image and an abstraction (reluctance). The particular image, then, may either depend on previously developed abstractions, contain one or more abstractions itself, or both.

The best stanzas of #1540 are the first three. Stanza 1 is figurative insofar as similitude is involved; stanzas 2 and 3 each contain three post-Symbolist images; the whole is expository:

As imperceptibly as grief
The summer lapsed away—
Too imperceptible, at last,
To seem like perfidy.

A quietness distilled,
As twilight long begun,
Or Nature, spending with herself
Sequestered afternoon.

The dusk drew earlier in,
The morning foreign shone—
A courteous, yet harrowing grace,
As guest who would be gone.

And thus, without a wing,
Or service of a keel,
Our summer made her light escape
Into the beautiful.

The first line of stanza 2 itself contains a post-Symbolist image, for we are meant to imagine a quietness that is modified by the imperceptibility established with astonishing definitiveness in the first stanza. The rest of stanza 2 contains two more post-Symbolist images, but these, like the last one in stanza 3, are created through similes modifying the previous image. There is thus a nice sense of rhetorical balance in the two stanzas. And, although there is an unmistakable falling off of excellence in the last stanza, the poem offers exquisite perceptions and handles abstraction superbly. Dickinson thereby defines unforgettably both the imperceptibility of summer (and of grief) lapsing away, and the emotion that the intelligent mind might experience at its loss.[40]

Dickinson's poems, though, including the best of them, are distinct from poems in the classical plain style, and in several ways. First of all, they are predominantly lyrical poems, and even the epigrammatic ones are not like epigrams in the classical sense; they are like epigrams in a medieval sense. Second, they are often intensely perceptual, sometimes valuable—like "A narrow fellow in the grass" (#986) and "The sky is low, the clouds are mean" (#1075)—almost purely for their images. Third (and this is related to genre and to some extent to subject matter), they tend to lack what we usually think of as urbanity, the sense of shared experience, an erudite manner. This is attributable to the limitations of Dickinson's experience, and it is most noticeable in her contorted syntax. As Donald Davie observes in *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1967), "[t]o abandon syntax in poetry is not to start or indulge a literary fashion; it is to throw away a tradition central to human thought and conduct, as to human speech" (98). Dickinson did not always do this, but it was one of her gravest faults, and it impinges upon both her claim to plainness and to greatness. But this general lack of urbanity is qualified by the availability to the reader of the experiences Dickinson defines in her poems, and it is more than made up for by their intensity, or concentration. To understand her finest poems is to understand the thoughts and perceptions of one of the greatest poets in the language, and to understand them quite accurately, with a certain awareness of emotional subtleties, usually related to despair, and most poignantly present in the rhythms. This last point is somewhat odd in that her poorer poems are often marked by rhythmical heavy-handedness or staleness, which is no doubt due to her having worked in the same metre so often; but in any case the great poems are distinguished by rhythms that complement the argument perfectly.

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[40] Number 1330 is on the same theme. The trivialising exclamation that ends the poem damages it sorely; and, although the rest of the lines are syntactically pure, the poem lacks the intensity of perception and thought of "As imperceptibly as grief." The second line is the best:

> Without a smile, without a throe,
> A summer's soft assemblies go
> To their entrancing end—
>
> Unknown, for all the times we met,
> Estranged, however intimate—
> What a dissembling friend.

A similar response to the passing of the seasons is treated in other poems, most notably in "A light exists in spring" (#812).

There is, then, a certain idiomatic impurity in the poems. It makes for a degree of awkwardness even in some of the best poems, but this awkwardness, or oddity, was habitual; it was a feature of Dickinson's eccentric personality, and it gave us one of the original voices in the language. It is a slip, but, paradoxically, it is a part of what makes her unique; it is not essential to the greatness but a distinguishing feature that accompanies it. What seems all but certain is that it would be impossible to found a tradition on her mannerisms, for Dickinsonian transgressions will mark a poem by anyone else as having Dickinsonian transgressions. To wish to imitate her faults would be like wishing upon oneself a scar or other imperfection belonging to a face whose character has made the imperfection its own. It would, in short, be perverse, if understandable. Typical faults can be found in the following poem; they are surpassed by its greatness, which is due to theme, post-Symbolist imagery, and rhythm:

Farther in summer than the birds,
Pathetic from the grass,
A minor nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive mass.

No ordinance is seen,
So gradual the grace,
A pensive custom it becomes,
Enlarging loneliness.

Antiquest felt at noon
When August, burning low,
Calls forth this spectral canticle,
Repose to typify.

Remit as yet no grace,
No furrow on the glow,
Yet a druidic difference
Enhances nature now.

The feeling of this poem originates in the poet's apprehension of an affinity with nature as old as human being. The Romantic poet would succumb to such a feeling, for the Romantic poet would fail to recognise adequately mankind's "loneliness," that which distinguishes our experience from that of nature,[41]

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[41] Compare Whitman's *Calamus* poem, "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" (93), in which the poet both compares himself to and distinguishes himself from a live oak. The tree is described as standing "All alone," "solitary in a wide flat space, / Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near" [*sic*]. Whitman thus appears to reject a Romantic value (solitude) while remaining essentially Romantic (in admiring solitude for its own sake, and the tree for enduring solitude, *etc.*). Dickinson, on the other hand, is concerned with man's loneliness, not that of a particular entity in nature. Although Whitman in this poem recognises the essential foreignness of nature, he sentimentalises this recognition. Also, compare Jonson's "A Pindaric Ode," in which "growing like a tree" and "standing long an oak" are rejected as inadequate human aims. The aim, rather, is moral perfection, but Jonson's didacticism is qualified by the lyrical quality of the ode:

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be;
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,

specifically, that of the insects celebrating their "unobtrusive mass." The mass is unobtrusive because it does not obtrude into our experience; if we are to assert, as the Romantic poet usually asserts, our oneness with nature, then we wilfully open ourselves to the obtrusion. That way lies madness and death, or, at least, the dissolution of mind; madness and death are not inevitable, but dissolution is. Dickinson, who felt pathos for nature's grace, also felt the antiquity of the "druidic difference" between man and nature. And so although she writes with an intense sympathy for nature, that sympathy is limited by what she can know, by what human experience allows.

Despite the excellence of this poem, there is its idiomatic impurity, evident in the transition from stanza 2 to 3 (the subject for stanza 3 is "loneliness," which raises questions about the necessity of the period at the end of stanza 2), the stubborn inversion in line 12, and the elliptical syntax of line 13 (which unfortunately gives the adjective, "Remit," the sense of a verb, and which, once again, is the result of Dickinson's concern for form and, however paradoxically, for finding just the right word). But each of these is finally a minor fault against clarity, and the first and third are lessened somewhat insofar as they make for brevity. Then there is the first line of the poem, which may at first seem obscure, but which is actually a mark of genius. "Farther in summer" seems an odd thing to say, the comparative more commonly used to modify, not as an adjective but an adverb, a spatial rather than a temporal entity: "we walked farther along the strand." But "Farther in

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To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sear:
  A lily of a day
  Is fairer far in May,
 Although it fall and die that night;
 It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see,
And in short measures life may perfect be.

summer" is an adjectival phrase modifying "A minor nation"; likewise, the adjective "farther" modifies a season, "in summer." The line means at least five things: the insects, presumably crickets, are more distant during summer from an unstated observation point than are the birds; they are harder to see anyway—they are elusive, we often hear them without seeing them; they are farther into their particular summer than the birds because of the comparative brevity of their life cycle; also, they are more a part of summer than the birds, for, unlike the birds, their lives will end with the season, or with the advancement of the next (which in part accounts for the pathos of line 2); and, most importantly, because they are more a part of summer and even of nature, they are more remote from us, whereas birds, in general, adapt to man's impositions, can be domesticated, and, even wild, are more readily given human attributes by man. Birds, it might be added, make for a fitting comparison because they, too, celebrate their mass audibly. The first line does not in itself give us a definite image, but because of its various simultaneous meanings it is animated so as to suggest an image. The compactness of the line is very impressive, and the apparent oddity of it recedes to nothing upon close examination. The whole poem engages in the post-Symbolist image of the celebrating insects that is established in the first stanza, each successive stanza contributing to the image. The image is a simple one, but the care with which it is handled makes it one of great beauty, and both the simplicity and the beauty function in the appeal of the communion with nature—or immersion in it—that the poem rejects with notable finality and exceptional sensitivity.

A combination of controlled rhythms and exactness of perception makes the post-Symbolist image the sensitive instrument it is. When this sensitivity is combined with relevant abstraction an extraordinary meaningfulness can result. The sensitivity enables the poet to sound nuances of feeling in a similar way that the innovation of the classical plain style enabled poets greater flexibility—in rhythm, subject matter, and feeling. Both enable the poet to concentrate on his matter, not to the exclusion of form and style, but to the controlled subjugation of it. Both, too, might be said to work by means of an indirect directness. If this is not always true of the classical plain style, it is often true. Thus, Jonson in his poems of praise (for example, "On Lucy, Countess of Bedford" and "To Sir Henry Goodyere," numbers 76 and 85 of the *Epigrams*, respectively) should not be taken literally, as a modern reader concerned with a narrow honesty might be inclined to take him, but in the sense that Jonson delineates at the close of "To My Muse" (65 of the *Epigrams*): "Whoe'er is raised / For worth he has not, he is taxed, not praised." That is, whoever is raised by Jonson is taxed with the burden of living up to the standards set for him or her by Jonson. The biting wit of many of the epigrams likewise works by indirect directness:

On English Monsieur

Would you believe, when you this monsieur see
 That his whole body should speak French, not he?
. . . .
That he, untravelled, should be French so much,
As Frenchmen in his company should seem Dutch? (1-2, 7-8, *Epig*. 88)

And, as we have seen, the didacticism of Oliver's "Coffeehouse Poems" also works by indirectness, but the indirectness is qualified by the direct, expository nature of the poem. Similarly, the post-Symbolist method has all the indirectness, or suggestiveness, of Symbolism and all the directness, or explicitness, of abstract language. In "'Twas warm at first like us," for example, there is the direct treatment of the dead body, while at the same time there is indirect commentary on human experience; the direct description leads us indirectly into the argument about the "absolute cleavage between the living and the dead." Indirect directness thus to a considerable extent accounts for Dickinson's position in "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant."

It should perhaps be stressed that the post-Symbolist method is a method, or a feature of style, rather than a style itself; the method is therefore open to different styles. "'Twas warm at first like us" employs the method and, in its cold clinicality, is composed in about as plain a style as could be expected, given the purpose of the poem. There is a more elevated style, however, in the closing lines of Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning":

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

The "wide water" of the fourth line quoted refers back to the first stanza, in which "some procession of the dead" is described as "Winding across wide water, without sound. / The day is like wide water without sound . . . ." Wide water has thus been given a symbolic meaning associated with death (and, because of lines not quoted here, with Christ's death in particular), if somewhat vaguely. There is nothing vague, though, about the images and meaning of the rest of the lines quoted. Again, as Winters points out, the argument—that we are essentially alone in a beautiful universe that ought fully to be appreciated, and that death is obliteration—resides in the combination of imagery and abstraction (*FD* 273-76). Winters' discussion of Stevens' pigeons is particularly relevant to the present purpose:

> These pigeons are different from Shakespeare's lark in Sonnet XXIX. The lark is merely a lark, with the author's personal sentimentality imposed upon it arbitrarily. The pigeons embody an idea as well as a feeling, and the idea motivates the feeling. The pigeons cannot be separated from the idea: they are a part of the universe which the poet is trying to understand, and at this point they are an efficiently representative part. The rational soul and the sensible soul are united: we do not have the purely rational soul of Jonson nor the purely sensible soul of Pound; and there is no decoration. The universe which Stevens describes is ambiguous in its ultimate meanings. But there is nothing ambiguous in the style; ambiguity is rendered with the greatest of precision. (*FD* 276)

The method, then, or rhetorical procedure, is plain and it isn't plain; or, at least, it makes for a specialised kind of plainness: imagistic but not decorative or ambiguous, abstract but rooted in a sensuous apprehension of experience. The process offers a balance between concept and percept, though this is not to suggest that these terms are opposites to one another. In any case, the method enables the poet to say much in a little and puts no limitations on subject matter. It is also available to different styles. While Dickinson's use of the method makes for relatively plain poems, the closing lines of "Sunday Morning" are, because of the Wordsworthian blank verse (though it, as we have seen, is itself indebted to the innovation of the classical plain style in English) and the diction, more elevated. The opening lines of the poem, however, are in the quieter gaudy style of Stevens:

> Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of a cockatoo
> Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
> The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

The "mingling" process is post-Symbolist. These lines do not have the same degree of burdened abstraction as those that close the poem, partly because they are without the cumulative effect of the rest of the poem, and partly because there are fewer abstractions. But "complacencies," "late" (being Sunday morning), and "freedom" combine with the images "to dissipate," for the woman figured in the poem, the meaningfulness of Christianity. The last line quoted is thus itself both descriptive and abstract. The images here, though, are more exotic than those that close the poem, and so the style is more elevated yet; it is a kind of secularised grandness, and it is Wordsworthian of Stevens to end his poem on a comparatively plainer, quieter note. Thus, even within a given poem the post-Symbolist method lends itself to stylistic modulations.

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There is more to be said about the plainness of Dickinson than that of Whitman, and all has certainly not been said here. Dickinson's poetry is often barbaric in its abuses of the language, but the barbarism, unlike that of Whitman, is qualified by her concern for form, definition, and, by extension, definitiveness and finish. Form was essential to her concern for definition, because form makes for the finished; and even if there are few truly finished poems, a respect for the finished can be found throughout Dickinson's work. Moreover, the unfinished, or the rough, often combines with Dickinson's characteristic moral seriousness to result in poems reminiscent of the sixteenth-century native plain style. Whitman's plainspokenness, on the other hand, merely led to definiteness, with Whitman as authority, and to the Romantic doctrine of immersion. Holding firmly against this doctrine, Dickinson was able to define human experiences, while Whitman became lost in them. Whitman's perceptual powers virtually overwhelmed him; Dickinson's did not overwhelm her because of her conceptual grasp on reality. Concepts, or abstraction, no less than percepts, or concretion, were essential, despite Allen Tate's provocative remark that "[s]he could not in the proper sense think at all" (*CE* 207), and she was able to combine concept and percept so as to create post-Symbolist imagery before the advent of the Symbolists. Whitman's imagistic poems and passages are simply descriptive, and they are opportunities for mergence with the object perceived. Many of Dickinson's poems are also valuable only at the descriptive level, but in some poems—and in most of her greatest—the images take on a burden of meaning that is not vague or ambiguous but precise and clear. She did not write in the classical plain style, but the sensitivity and profoundness she achieved by means of the simultaneous conceptual and perceptual import of such poems is comparable to the sensitivity and profoundness possible in the classical plain style. Plainness in Dickinson, then, extends to the sensuous apprehension of reality as well as to the intellectual; that both might occur not just in the same poem but at the very same moment makes for a brevity and clarity that is truly innovative. Furthermore, in her hands this method resulted in relatively plain poems, though the method itself might be used for more rhetorical, more elevated purposes.

The principle of plainness was at work in the minds of arguably the two most important American poets of the nineteenth century. But the idea of a plain style had not been fully articulated since the seventeenth century. The principle hadn't disappeared, though; it had slipped beneath the surface. It was rarely glimpsed by the poets, and then only partially. Because of this, and because of the different philosophical positions of the poets—however rough-hewn those positions may have been—the principle was interpreted differently, and this different interpretation at least in part accounts for the great difference in the poems. As we shall see, it also in part accounts for the opening up of the term *plainness* in the twentieth century, and for the fundamental split between the "traditional" and the "experimental" in poetry, or traditional verse and free verse, that has characterised the century.

Chapter Three: Robinson and Pound

I

> They [the members of the Royal Society] have . . . been most rigorous in putting in execution, the only Remedy, that can be found for this extravagance [of language]: and that has been, a constant Resolution to reject all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*. They have exacted for all their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars.
>
> —Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society (1666)*[42]

It would be stretching things but little to say that the Royal Society's edicts on style ultimately had an effect on twentieth-century poetry. This effect has of course been indirect; the modernists did not look to the Reverend Mr. Sprat for authority. They tended not to look to authority at all. For they were greatly concerned with novelty and, in general, adopted the radical view that only the new could adequately treat the modern situation, and that the old—the traditional and the conventional—was therefore to be overthrown. What the modern situation presented the intellectual, and for our purposes the poet, was a de-mythologized, de-mystified, enlightened, and secular world. The real was now to be determined by science; modern experience involved the scientification of reality. The sciences, both the "pure" and the "social," insisted upon the objective observation of phenomena and applied the rigours of logic to observation in the endeavour to ascertain the truth. As much as for the divine poet of the seventeenth century, truth was the objective, but truth was no longer to be abused by the vagaries of metaphysical speculation, the insubstantiality of belief, or the tyranny of undefinable abstractions. Truth would finally be properly sought by the intellectual; truth would be verifiable, for modern experience revealed that truth was materialistic.

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[42] See Tillotson, *et al.*, p. 27 (Section XX of the *History*, "Their Manner of Discourse," in *The Second Part*).

This is a well-known story to students of modern poetry. But what has gone substantially unrecognised by critics of modern poetry is the role that the principle of plainness has played in shaping one of Modernism's most important theoretical developments, Imagism. This role will be outlined in section IV of this chapter, which will be devoted to the theories and poetry of Ezra Pound; section III will primarily be concerned with the work of a universally acknowledged plain stylist, Edwin Arlington Robinson; section II will outline themes related to the problem of plainness that will be examined in sections III and IV. For now, it is enough to say by way of introduction that not only can the aesthetic justification of Imagism be traced to Whitman, and through him to Wordsworth, but the theoretical—linguistic and philosophical—justification can be traced back to the stylistic tenets of the Royal Society, and, even further, to the epistemology of Sir Francis Bacon. Modernism may not have had anything truly classical about it, despite what some of its chief proponents, such as Hulme, Pound, and Eliot, claimed. But there is no doubt that Imagism, at least, owed a great deal to the advancements of science in the Renaissance, and that, by the time of Sprat's *History*, plainness—"Mathematical plainness"—had emerged as a principle central to those advancements. Plainness was, for the Royal Society, as essential to the revelation of truth as it had ever been, and Imagism would come to promote a kind of plainness similar to that promoted by the Society. About twenty years before the advent of Imagism, however, Robinson was forming himself into a traditionalist and a plain stylist of the first order, and his subsequent poetry would have nothing to do with Imagism. It would have something to do, though, with opposing the materialism that would play such an important part in the modern movement, and everything to do with the principle of plainness.

II

George Crabbe

Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,—
But his hard, human pulse is throbbing still
With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.
In spite of all fine science disavows,
Of his plain excellence and stubborn skill
There yet remains what fashion cannot kill,
Though years have thinned the laurel from his brows.

Whether or not we read him, we can feel
From time to time the vigor of his name
Against us like a finger for the shame
And emptiness of what our souls reveal
In books that are as altars where we kneel
To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.

—Robinson, *The Children of the Night* (*CP* 94)

> Presentation, description, in place of Popean comment.
>
> . . . .
>
> Change from Pope to Crabbe, change from Voltaire to Stendhal and Flaubert. Crabbe conveying information, not yet eschewing comment on principle, though much more effective where he doesn't insert it.
>
> Perfectly clear . . . that he is doing the novelist's work, Dickens, Disraeli, etc. . . .
>
> [Austen's] novels are, with perfect justice, the more widely read a century after Crabbe's death. Crabbe is undeniably reading matter, not singing matter, and he is well worth reading though I don't imagine he is greatly re-read. Jane's novels don't either replace him or wipe him from the map. Rhymed couplets are unlikely to compete with De Maupassant, let alone with Hollywood.
>
> If one is convinced that the film offers, in the present century, a better form than the stage, he is unlikely to advise anyone to write any *more* heroic couplets.
>
> On the other hand, given a curiosity about the social condition of England in 1810, can you find a more condensed account than Crabbe's of the whole social order?
>
> —Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934), 175-77

The significance of these coincidental commentaries on Crabbe by Robinson and by Pound lies in what each poet praises Crabbe for, and in what each sees as being of permanent value in Crabbe. Furthermore, that which each poet praises in Crabbe's work also characterises his own poetry. John Lucas, in "The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson," points to this fact about Robinson's sonnet:

> The praise not only memorably catches Crabbe's especial distinction, it points to Robinson's very similar strengths. For Crabbe's "plain excellence" is of course that of the unadorned style. Moreover, the phrase has a sly wit to it, it hints at the unarguable fact of that excellence, and this laconic turn of expression is also common to both men. (Bloom 142)

"Plain excellence" does indeed refer to Crabbe's unadorned style, but also to the plain, or obvious, excellence of Crabbe's matter: it is praise of style and substance, and the substance is contrary to that which "science disavows"; it is that which "fashion cannot kill." In short, Robinson praises Crabbe for his ability to write the truth, and this truth is more than the "ability to write memorably and truthfully about very ordinary people" and the "plain realities" that Lucas goes on to mention (142, 153). This truth is abstract. Also, there is no "sly wit" in the phrase "plain excellence"; rather than "hint" at "the unarguable fact," it simply states what Robinson regards as a fact, and stops short any discussion of the matter. The poem does, though, catch "Crabbe's especial distinction" and point to "Robinson's very similar strengths." To be exact, in its praise of Crabbe, it suggests that Robinson is a humanist, realist, monotheist, traditional plain stylist, classicist, and moral absolutist.

"George Crabbe" is a didactic poem as well as a poem of praise. The diction is characteristic of Robinson in its strength and its weakness. Its strength is that it is, in the tradition of the classical plain style, the customary language of the learned. Its weakness is most clearly seen in "lonely garrets" in line 2, though the "throbbing" "pulse" of line 3 is almost as weak. The weakness is the sin of cliché, which, perhaps more than other poets, the writer of unadorned traditional poetry must ever be wary of, and which occasionally mars Robinson's poetry. The diction of the second quatrain and of the sestet is distinguished by "plain excellence," and the admirable way in which Robinson engages the tradition is evident in the last line of the octave and the last two of the sestet. In these lines, ancient poetic conventions—the laureled brow, the altars, and the flame—are rescued from disuse rather than resorted to as convenient props. That they are extremely old-fashioned makes their use appropriate in connection with Crabbe, as does the fact that they are time-honoured and have a certain dignity. Robinson doesn't slip into cliché; he turns old conventions to new use. He has combined, in a manner similar to Ben Jonson in some of his finest poems, most notably "Though beauty be the mark of praise,"[43] two purposes: to praise Crabbe (to which the conventional language referred to contributes), and to instruct his own modern audience, as well as remind himself, about Crabbe's permanent value. That value is, despite that which makes Crabbe's poetry somewhat dated ("Though years have thinned the laurel from his brows"), the "sure strength" of "fearless truth." No less for Robinson than for Crabbe, truth, "the flame," goes beyond the material; "fine science" cannot disavow it, even if it cannot prove its existence. The didactic, or moral, element is nicely modified by the praise in an endeavour to preserve and contribute to the moral, humanistic enterprise common to both poets.

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[43] In *Forms of Discovery* (66), Winters argues that Jonson's poem is "a fusion of two kinds of poetry: the song and the didactic poem." See also Jonson's many poems (for example, "Ode: To Sir William Sidney, on His Birthday") that combine praise with moral instruction.

Robinson's praise of Crabbe is founded on the conviction that abstractions (which may be included in "all fine science disavows") are real, and suggests that the essence of Crabbe's famous realism is to be found in his ability to treat abstractions in cogently human terms (note the second foot of "But his hard, human pulse"). Like Robinson, Pound praises Crabbe for his style (insofar as it makes for accurate description) and his matter (insofar as it conveys "information"). Pound values "presentation" and disparages "comment," "Popean" or otherwise. The poet, he says in his clipped, telegraphic prose, is a conveyor of information and ought to eschew "comment on principle." The poet is a passive, presumably impersonal, medium through which experience passes, and the experience would appear to be primarily of an objective sort. By this means, the poet, like the novelist, essentially serves as a historian, or a recorder of facts, whom one might turn to, "given a curiosity" about social conditions, for information. Pound had his aesthetic side, but it is not apparent here. The poet's role is very much a pragmatic matter, and Pound has a keen sense of competition, not only with novelists, or, more generally, writers of prose fiction, but with Hollywood. His principles appear to be based on the desire for power and the fear of competition. His rhetoric is better than his logic: "If one is convinced that the film offers, in the present century, a better form than the stage, he is unlikely to advise anyone to write any *more* heroic couplets." It is a striking sentence; Pound takes it for granted that the poet is necessarily in competition with films and the stage. But one is entitled to ask just exactly what film is "a better form" *of* than the stage. The answer would probably have to be *entertainment*, and, hence, it is apparent that by "the stage" Pound regards all forms of drama (at least up until that point in the twentieth century) merely as forms of entertainment. The heroic couplet (the stage, presumably, has no further use of it) is therefore in competition with forms of popular entertainment. Anyone concerned about serious art would no doubt have some sympathy for the artist in the implied predicament. But Pound's advice to the artist, or poet, is to eschew not only comment but the heroic couplet. The artist, in other words, ought to enter the competition, and since he is a poet his office is to record "information" that will reflect the times, and the times cannot be described by means of the heroic couplet, for the heroic couplet is as dated as Crabbe. In 1934, then, when *ABC of Reading* was first published, Pound was still advocating the theories that resulted in such modernist landmarks as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *The Waste Land*, and the early *Cantos*.

For Pound, Crabbe's ongoing value is as an incomplete historian (for complete, real historians offer commentary) or a sort of superior journalist. This perspective stands in contrast to that of Robinson (not that Robinson would have looked down upon Crabbe's importance as a descriptive poet or a *critic* of social conditions), and this is not surprising. For Pound's comments reveal him as an empiricist (of sorts) and a nominalist, and they suggest that he was a moral relativist and probably an atheist.[44] In rejecting Crabbe's commentary in favour of his descriptive passages alone, Pound rejects the moral element, and therefore the abstraction, that Robinson regards essential. For Pound observation of an objective, verifiable sort is the poet's business; ideas and abstractions—commentary—have no basis in reality. Moral relativism and atheism would appear either to follow of necessity, or to have motivated the rejection of commentary.

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[44] Pound often spoke of "the gods" but does not appear to have been a true polytheist. He certainly did not believe in one God, for he usually reserved his more serious theistic statements for attacks on monotheism.

It is of the greatest significance that the appraisals of Crabbe by Robinson and by Pound are both concerned with truth. Robinson's concern is explicit, Pound's implicit. Robinson's truth, like Crabbe's, is the realist's and absolutist's truth; Pound's is the nominalist's and relativist's, or pluralist's. Robinson was a conservative: to get at his version of the truth, he engaged with the tradition without seeking to destroy it. Pound was a radical: we have long been able to see that, to get at *his* version of the truth, he eventually found himself, like other leading modernists, in the awkward position of looking to the tradition to satiate his aesthetic craving for cultural morsels, while at the same time proposing the rejection, and even—in Pound's case, unwittingly—the destruction, of the tradition. Having embraced tradition and mastered its forms, Robinson was able to further it, to bring his own experience to bear upon it. Having taken an adversarial stand toward tradition, however much he admired its artifacts, Pound was forced into embracing the idea of novelty. But as J. V. Cunningham astutely observes in "Lyric Style in the 1590's," novelty "is no positive principle; it stipulates only a something else. It is a principle of rejection rather than of selection" (*C E* 319). And so the poet, artist, or theorist who embraces the idea of novelty and proposes the rejection, let alone the destruction, of tradition but carefully selects cultural morsels, is parasitic on the tradition. This may seem harsh, but it is difficult to defend Pound against this judgement. And not only did Pound select morsels, he also used traditional forms when they suited him. That he sometimes did so masterfully elevates his case from an unfortunate to something of a tragic one. Pound's confusion (exemplified in his advice, however humorous, against pitting the heroic couplet against Hollywood[45]) made possible his acceptance of the notion that because poetry had fallen upon hard times the tradition (the use of conventions and traditional forms) was to blame, and that art, to be of value in the marketplace and of permanent value as cultural artifact, had to mirror the times in its form or formlessness.[46] This confusion may well have come down directly from Whitman, who, as we have seen, advocated the rejection of the tradition of poetry in English because it could not possibly be pertinent to American experience; because the experience was new, a new poetics, and a new language, was deemed necessary. In any case, it is an inheritance of the revolutionary posture of Romantic theory. We can see now that it was not necessary but a matter of artistic choice, and the proof is in the poetry of a traditionalist like Robinson, whose poetry exploits the inherent flexibility of the tradition and of the traditional notion of a plain style.

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[45] Pound's reference to the film and to Hollywood was echoed and surpassed in its

The traditional office of the plain style, as Cicero informs us in *Orator* 75-90, and as Socrates had established it for philosophical purposes, is to prove, or to teach, and so the plain style's especial object is the truth.[47] Hence, brevity, clarity, humility, grace, and appropriateness (Trimpi 64) are virtues for the plain stylist, whether the medium be oratory, prose, or poetry. It is unlikely that anyone would dispute that Robinson's poetry, as a whole and in most, if not all, of his finest poems, is charaterised, in varying degrees, by an effort to undertake the office of the plain style. Like Dickinson's, his is a

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brazenness by the postmodernist poet Frank O'Hara when he declared that of poets only Whitman, Williams, and Crane are better than the movies.

[46] Winters has called this theory of art the fallacy of imitative form. See *In Defense of Reason*, 64.

[47] See Cicero, *Brutus*, *Orator*. See also Cicero in Cunningham's *The Problem of Style*. Wesley Trimpi's various remarks in *Ben Jonson's Poems* (for example, on pp. 5-6) on Socrates' plain, or philosophical, style stand behind the position adhered to in this discussion. For an examination of Shakespeare's use of the plain style in the plays see John Baxter's *Shakespeare's Poetic Styles*.

poetry concerned with what we can know,[48] whose final aim is truth. But, again like Dickinson's, it is not nearly as dull as this may make it sound. The reason for this is that the best of Robinson's poetry is rooted in particular (but not necessarily personal) experiences, and that the governing stylistic principle is to write with a conversational grace, as in fact the classical plain style demanded. The ideal model is, as it was for Ben Jonson, the conversation of the learned, and Robinson achieves this ideal to a greater extent than any other poet in this study. He sometimes, though, fell into relaxed, or mannered, colloquialism, whose pretense of plain speech is ever a danger to the plain stylist, and which has burgeoned in popularity ever since Wordsworth's plea for "the real language of men," "a plainer and more emphatic language," and poems written about "[h]umble and rustic life" (see pp. 36-37 above). It is by means of this conversational grace and his attentiveness to particular human predicaments, whether the stuff of drama or of contemplation, that Robinson is able to make his generalisations live. His is a fully human, humane, and civilised poetry. It is the humanity and the civilised nature of his work that will be examined in the next section of this chapter, where it will be argued that Robinson's especial object was truth, and that he was committed to Socratic and Christian principles that taught that to understand is necessary for the realisation of truth. To understand, moreover, depended primarily on one's capacity for reason (which does not exclude but tempers raw feelings), and plainness was the means by which understanding was to be both attained and conveyed in the poetry.

Pound, unlike Robinson, and unlike his imagistic forebear Whitman, is not remembered as a compassionate, humane poet. Nor was he, in the final analysis, a civilised poet but one who superseded the kinder, gentler Whitman as the poet of barbarism. There is ample evidence to support this view in Pound's theoretical and critical prose, and the poetry largely substantiates the prose. And yet, as has been mentioned, Pound was in a curious way a proponent of civilisation (culture might be the better word), or, at least, of *civilisations*. If Wordsworth was a dabbler in nature and the uncivilised, and Whitman, for all his celebration of urban America, was more the real thing, was Wordsworth gone wild, Pound was a Whitman-like barbarian in love with civilisation. Out of that love affair came a fragmented, largely incoherent body of work whose most lasting contribution has probably been the Image. It will be shown in the fourth section of this chapter that Pound's Imagism and various other key theories are, though in a different way than Robinson's humane and humanistic approach, concerned with the ideal of truth, and that the principle of plainness is intrinsic to those theories.

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[48] Richard Hoffpauir, in "E. A. Robinson and the Conditions of Knowing," the first chapter of a forthcoming book, makes an extended study of Robinson's interest in this subject.

III

Robinson: The Compassionate Plain Stylist, or the Civilised American Provincial

> With the admiration for Washington [in Robinson's "On the Way"] one cannot quarrel, nor can one quarrel with the unkind but essentially true statements about the common man; but again one is at a loss to discern the relationship of Washington to the common man, the way in which he may be said to guide the common man or be of value to him. In the nature of this relationship lies all the difference between barbarism and civilization, however halting. For Washington will be merely a menace to the nation if the common man depends upon him blindly. Unless the influence of Washington can outlast Washington, can teach the common man a few truths and give him a few perceptions, so that he can hope to survive the intervals between Washingtons, then the common man is lost.

—Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson*[8]

Winters' book on Robinson was published two years after the Second World War. His remarks on the dangers of hero worship, or blindly following political or military leaders (and his point might be extended to include other sorts of leaders, especially intellectual ones), have the experience of history behind them. Barbarism is identified with the uncritical acceptance, or worship, of the great leader, for such acceptance or worship might result in totalitarianism. The maintenance or introduction of civilisation is identified with the common man's ability to understand the teachings of the great leader, and with his having the freedom to scrutinise those teachings. Such a situation is only truly possible in democratic societies. Ezra Pound's admiration for the great leader and his disdain for the common man and for democracy led, of course, to his endorsement of Fascism in Mussolini's Italy. Robinson, on the other hand, though he admired certain great leaders (for example, St. Paul, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and even Thomas Carlyle and John Brown) was a supporter of democracy. Pound's political sympathies are related to his poetry, and to the theories (often dogmatic in tone) that substantiate his poetry, insofar as each is a manifestation of barbarism. Robinson's political sympathies are, likewise, related to his poetry and, although he wrote no formal theoretical or critical works, to the poetic theories extant in his poetry and letters. His political and poetic convictions were manifestations of his understanding of, and belief in, civilisation.

Robinson regarded the maintenance of civilisation as the responsibility of everyone who belongs to it, and the writer perhaps most of all. In a letter

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[8] The discussion that follows will no doubt reflect indebtedness to Winters' book, which is, and by a good margin, the best study of Robinson's work. For the quoted passage, see p. 61.

(19 June, 1899) to his friend Daniel Gregory Mason, he criticises Thoreau in terms that firmly set him apart from the Emersonian, or Romantic, tradition, despite his admiration for Emerson and the occasional Emersonianism in his work:

> I stretched out yesterday and read *Walking*, but did not quite relish what seemed to me to be a sort of glorified Thoreau cowardice all through the thing. For God's sake, says the sage, let me get away into the wilderness where I shall not have a single human responsibility or the first symptoms of social discipline, let me be a pickerel or a skunk cabbage, anything that will not have to meet the realities of civilization. There is a wholesomeness about some people that is positively unhealthy, and I find it in this essay. Still I am ready for *Walden*. (*Selected Letters* [49] 17-18)

For Robinson, the writer has a responsibility "to meet the realities of civilization" and to defend and advance civilised life. To do otherwise would probably mean profiting from civilisation at its expense. Nature, if not exactly the "wilderness," held its attractions for Robinson, but he did not endorse the Romantic notion of nature's beneficence, as can be seen from these words, written almost thirty years after those above and about seven months before his death from cancer, to his long-time friend, Mrs. Laura E. Richards: "I'm afraid, on the whole, that there isn't much comfort in nature as a visible evidence of God's infinite love. It appears to be a shambles and a torture-chamber from the insects up—or should we say down?" (*SL* 177).

Nor is there any naive adoration of nature in the poetry, as "The Torrent," from *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896) and reprinted in *The Children of the Night* (1897), makes clear:

> I found a torrent falling in a glen

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[49] Hereafter, references to *Selected Letters* will be abbreviated *SL*; those to *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry de Forest Smith, 1890-1905*, abbreviated *US* ; and those to *Edwin Arlington Robinson's Letters to Edith Brower* abbreviated *EB*. References following quotations from the *Collected Poems* will be cited *CP*. All other quotations will be referred to by the name of the author or editor.

> Where the sun's light shone silvered and leaf-split;
> The boom, the foam, and the mad flash of it
> All made a magic symphony; but when
> I thought upon the coming of hard men
> To cut those patriarchal trees away,
> And turn to gold the silver of that spray,
> I shuddered. Yet a gladness now and then
> Did wake me to myself till I was glad
> In earnest, and was welcoming the time
> For screaming saws to sound above the chime
> Of idle waters, and for me to know
> The jealous visionings that I had had
> Were steps to the great place where trees and torrents go.
> (*CP* 108)

The "jealous visionings" are the loss of the "patriarchal trees" (line 6) and the turning of the "silver . . . spray" into gold (line 7). One sympathises with the early reviewer who observed that the poem, "which begins grandly in the octave . . . does not run itself clear in the sestette" (Cary, *Early Recption* 43). The sestet poses difficulties that prevent "The Torrent" from being one of Robinson's better sonnets. There is some difficulty in the syntax: "for" in line 12 runs parallel with "For" beginning line 11, but it is at first difficult to see how Robinson, or the speaker, could be "welcoming the time" that he would "know" that his "jealous visionings" were actually "steps to the great place." That is, one should think that he either knew then or he did not; he cannot legitimately welcome future knowledge that he has no means of anticipating. But the verb "to know" is no doubt short for "to have confirmed that," and so the difficulty in the syntax is actually more a problem of too great a brevity, or too little space. Then there is the "great place," which may at first seem irretrievably obscure but presents less of a problem if we consider the purpose of the action that takes place in the "jealous visionings." The purpose is to establish civilisation, or at least the outward manifestations of civilisation, the city (hence, "the great place"). The trees and torrents "go" toward the establishment of civilised man's dominion. The "visionings" (the action) are thus "steps" to the establishment of civilised life. But they are also "steps" in another sense: the "visionings" are scrutinised carefully so as to become initial steps in the process of contemplation about the problem of feeling profound admiration for nature and yet enjoying the advantages—from libraries to lavatories—of civilised life. The syntactical problem mentioned, the flaccid "now and then" of line 8, the progressive form of the verb ("Did wake") in line 9, the rough handling of the somewhat fond sentiments of the octave in "I . . . was welcoming the time / For screaming saws to sound above the chime," the indirection of "the great place," and the slight redundancy of "where trees and torrents go" combine to prevent the poem from being one of Robinson's best, but the subject and the argument make it worthy of attention. The argument explains why Robinson was disappointed about "'the total inability of almost everybody who reads the book to find out what I mean by the last two lines of "The Torrent,"'" and why he insisted on keeping the lines as they were through all printings of the poem from 1896 to the final edition of the *Collected Poems* in 1935 (Cary, *Early Reception* 44, n. 2).

The structure of "The Torrent" is of the utmost significance. Robinson begins with standard Romantic material: "a torrent falling in a glen / Where the sun's light shone silvered and leaf-split." He goes on, however, not to indulge in reverie about the beauty of nature or the strength of his feelings for nature, but to do some hard thinking about civilised man's relationship to nature. In the end, despite the flaws in the poem, he arrives at understanding, and that is the fundamental value that this, and all of Robinson's work, has to offer. Such understanding is dependent upon abstraction; it is often, if not usually, found in passages of what Pound would call "comment." It is thus more or less explicit, direct—though as we have seen there may be local indirection, or implicitness. But, as the opening, and especially the second line, of "The Torrent" demonstrates, Robinson could give the sort of attention to detail that the Imagists would demand, or that Wordsworth advocated in the 1815 *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads* : "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject; consequently, there is I hope in these Poems little falsehood of description . . ." (307). As did Wordsworth, Robinson felt that descriptive excellence was not enough. The structure of "The Torrent" reveals Robinson's primary interest in arriving at understanding through the process of contemplation; the structure is therefore rational. Contemplation may not explicitly take place in a given poem, but each poem is the result of contemplation. Understanding is as fundamental to Robinson as it was to Ben Jonson, whose "To the Reader" gives summary advice that Socrates would have sanctioned:

> Pray thee take care, that tak'st my book in hand,
> To read it well, that is, to understand. (*Epigrams* 1)

Understanding is what Robinson both seeks through and brings to his poetry. Furthermore, he seeks it both for himself and for others, and those others include not only his readers but also every human being, insofar as those who are affected by his poetry will gain greater understanding of what it is to be human and thereby feel greater sympathy for their fellows. The letters have numerous passages that implicitly or explicitly refer to the importance of understanding, though on occasion wisdom itself is referred to, and often Robinson uses words such as "feeling" and "knowing" that are related to "understanding," or approximate it:

> If printed lines are good for anything, they are bound to be picked up some time; and then, if some poor devil of a man or woman feels any better or any stronger for anything that I have said, I shall have no fault to find with the scheme or anything in it. I am inclined to be a trifle solemn in my verses, but I intend that there shall always be at least a suggestion of something wiser than hatred and something better than despair. (13 May 1896, *US* 247)

> After reading Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra," postage stamps are not very powerful things to consider. They are so obviously material and my ideas are getting to be so thoroughly ideal, that the collecting of anything but wisdom often seems like going back into ignorance and barbarism. (6 November 1896, US 263)

> The thing for you to do is to go right down into the middle of life and compel the world to feel, as you feel it for others, the tension of endeavor, the pathos of failure and success . . . , and the pulse of human realism, of human passion that drives itself through all strong work like blood through a strong man—or a strong woman. (19 February 1897, *EB* 19)

> When I think of the hours I have spent over some of the lines in [*The Children of the Night*] I wonder if it is all worth while; but in the end I cease wondering. If anything is worthy of a man's best and hardest effort, that thing is the utterance of what he believes to be the truth. Of course I like a joke, and I like art for its own sake; but those things in themselves are not enough. Just as deliberate pathos in literature—that is, pathos for "effect" alone—is almost always a mistake, so, I think, is mere objectivity (I'd use some other word if I could think of it) at the best unsatisfactory. (1 November 1897, *US* 289)

> —I'm glad that you are "Knowing Yourself." I've been trying to do something of the kind for forty years. (3 February 1914, *SL* 82)

> I can only hope that I may leave a little something that will add a little to the lives of a few others. This sounds rather silly, and yet I suppose I mean it. (2 June 1918, *EB* 172)

> I suppose that a part of it might be described as a faint hope of making a few of us understand our fellow creatures a little better, and to realise what a small difference there is after all between ourselves as we are and ourselves not only as we might have been but would have been if our physical and temperamental make-up had been a little different. (Cary, *Appreciation* 292)

Such passages depict a humane, socially conscious and conscientious poet. Along with realising the truth, or seeking wisdom, to understand was the great task Robinson set for himself, and for his readers.

As we have seen, J. V. Cunningham has pointed out that novelty is not a "positive principle" but "a principle of rejection rather than of selection." Robinson was, as is well known, a novel poet, for as a young man he stood opposed to the conventional poeticisms of his time. But he was selective in what he rejected. Metre, the syntax of good prose, and Wordsworth's "real language of men," for instance, he found essential to his purpose of attaining and promoting understanding. And understanding, unlike novelty or the Romantic doctrine of the imagination or "art for art's sake" or Pound's criterion of "information" or any number of modernist criteria, such as Williams' "Objectivism" and Eliot's "'objective correlative,'" is good in and for itself. It is an absolute good that one cannot have too much of, and in this respect it is like the cardinal and the theological virtues. It is also in this respect like wisdom itself and is a crucial step to wisdom.

The centrality of understanding, and of wisdom, to Robinson's poetry and life is the most important reason for his repeated, life-long refusal to provide particularised theories that would account for his poetry, and his reluctance to comment on his "philosophy." He never theorised, but he held theories of a general nature, as one would expect from a poet who was vitally committed to such abstract notions as "understanding" and "wisdom." Again, the letters are full of pertinent remarks. To Amy Lowell he once wrote: ". . . I have absolutely no theories. I don't care a pinfeather what form a poem is written in so long as it makes me sit up" (18 March 1916, *SL* 93). To L. N. Chase, a professor of English, he wrote:

> I find it rather difficult to answer your letter, much as I appreciate it and your motive in writing it. I am handicapped at the start in having no biography and no theories. You will find as much in Who's Who as I have to say about myself personally; and as for my work, I have hoped that it might speak—not very loudly, perhaps—for itself.
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> ....
>
> I thought nothing when I was writing my first book of working for a week over a single line; and while I don't do it any more, I am sure that my technique is better for those early grilling exercises. In fact, I am now more than inclined to believe that the technical flabbiness of many writers is due to the lack in earlier years of just such grilling—in the years when one is not conscious of how hard he is working and of how much time

> he is wasting—unless he is ready to gamble his life away for the sake of a few inevitable words. (11 July 1917, *SL* 101-03)

Some fourteen years later, he wrote to Dr. Will Durant:

> I told a philosopher once that all the other philosophers would have to go out of business if one of them should happen to discover the truth; and now you say, or imply, in your letter that the truth has been discovered, and that we are only the worse off, if possible, for the discovery. This is naturally a cause of some chagrin and humiliation for me, for I had heard nothing about it. It is true that we have acquired a great deal of material knowledge in recent years, but so far as knowledge of the truth itself is concerned, I cannot see that we are any nearer to it now than our less imaginative ancestors were when they cracked each others' skulls with stone hatchets, or that we know any more than they knew of what happened to the soul that escaped in the process. (18 September 1931, *SL* 163-64)

And to Miss Bess Dworsky he wrote: "I am naturally gratified to learn that you are writing a thesis on my poetry, but I am rather sorry to learn that you are writing about my 'philosophy'—which is mostly a statement of my inability to accept a mechanistic interpretation of the universe and of life" (7 December 1931, *SL* 165). Robinson's interpretation of the universe was that there was order to it (*SL* 160). He once said that "the world is a hell of a place, but the universe is a fine thing"; and his first biographer, Hermann Hagedorn, reports the following: "'The universe is a great thing,' he wrote [his friend Arthur] Gledhill sagely, 'and the power of evil never put it together. Of that I am certain and I am just as certain that this life is but one little scene in the big show'" (91). The order of the universe, then, was more than a mechanistic matter.[50] The job of the poet, it followed, "must be," as he stated in a letter to his friend and a noted Harvard professor John Hays Gardiner, to be "an interpreter of life" (*SL* 15). This is as much as to say that the poet is to seek and to encourage understanding, or even wisdom.

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[50] Robinson had a mystical side that appears to have been an inheritance from his Calvinistic forebears that he could not, and probably did not care to, shake. See, for instance, his references to "the unseen powers" in his letters to Harry de Forest Smith, *US* 24 and 254.

Another and more familiar way of putting this is to say that the poet seeks truth. Truth for Robinson was not an easy thing. Truth resided in abstractions, but its attainment, for any human being, meant a continuous moral struggle, and for the poet it meant a similar struggle for "a few inevitable words." One might interpret this last phrase as an expression of Robinson's mysticism, or as a leftover of Calvinistic determinism, but it is more accurate to say that the poem was to have the *sense* of inevitability, or of just rightness. The poet may be inspired, but his quest for truth and for the few inevitable words was based on the "grilling" he mentions. As we have seen, he did not sentimentalise his admiration for nature; neither did he seek an Emersonian inspiration from it or from the universe. Nature, rather, was something to be wary of, as the passage quoted above (page 191) from his letter to Mrs. Richards and his poem "The Wilderness" proves. Here is the last third of the poem (the "roving-fiend" is the wilderness):

> Come away! come away!—or the roving-fiend will find us,
> And make us all to dwell with him to the end of human faring:
> There are no men yet may leave him when his hands are
>   clutched upon them,
> There are none will own his enmity, there are none will call him
>   brother.
> So we'll be up and on the way, and the less we boast the better
> For the freedom that God gave us and the dread we do not know:—
> The frost that skips the willow-leaf will again be back to blight it,
> And the doom we cannot fly from is the doom we do not see.
>
> Come away! come away! there are dead men all around us—
> Frozen men that mock us with a wild hard laugh
> That shrieks and sinks and whimpers in the shrill November
>   rushes,
> And the long fall wind on the lake. (*CP* 100)

Again, this passage does not come from one of Robinson's best poems, but it is from as sure and clear-sighted an anti-wilderness and anti-Romantic poem as one might find. Nature, or the wilderness, could not be depended upon for the truth, because nature was an indifferent force that betokened evil as well as good for human beings and human being. Civilisation, civilised thinking and, especially, feeling, was necessary for truth, and therefore for understanding.

Robinson on occasion called himself a mystic, and he is often accepted as having been one, but there are substantial obstacles to accepting this view of his metaphysics, and they have to do with his constant desire for understanding and for knowing. It is significant that, in a letter to Miss Helen Grace Adams, it is in a resigned way that he refers to himself as a mystic. Miss Adams, writing a Masters thesis on his work, wrote asking for a statement on his "'theory of poetry and philosophy of life in general'" (*SL* 190):

> There is no "philosophy" in my poetry beyond an implication of an ordered universe and a sort of deterministic negation of the general futility that appears to be the basis of "rational" thought. So I suppose you will have to put me down as a mystic, if that means a man who cannot prove all his convictions to be true. I dislike "Rabbi Ben Ezra" so much as a poem that I haven't read it in something like thirty years, but I should say, not having a very clear memory of it, that its easy optimism is a reflection of temperament rather than of experience and observation. (1 January 1930, SL 160)

Robinson's poetry offers the "*implication* of an ordered universe" because he cannot prove what he strongly believes. His "negation of the general futility that appears to be the basis of 'rational' thought," which may be equated with the "mechanistic," or materialist, view of the universe that logical positivism in particular and science and much modern philosophy in general propounded, is described as "deterministic" probably because of the "native inability" he speaks of in another letter "to believe" in the "tragic absurdity" of a materialist universe (*SL* 164). That is, like Dickinson, Robinson owed a good deal to his Calvinist heritage. Rational thought is slighted, of course, only insofar as modern rational philosophies tended to dismiss religious belief; the demands, say, of a philosophy like logical positivism for analytic or empirically verifiable statements almost relegated metaphysical and theological speculation—or speculation of any kind—to the realm of fantasy. Hence the quotation marks around *rational.* Robinson himself was nothing if not a strikingly rational poet, as poems like "Hillcrest" and "Veteran Sirens" make clear. So, too, does the resignedness of his acceptance of the term "mystic," and the remarks on Browning's poem, "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

The above comments on Browning's often anthologised poem help to clear up an otherwise ambiguous reference to it in the letter concerning postage stamps (quoted above on p. 195) written on 6 November, 1896. The two references together make it plain that the cosy corporeality that Browning tries to pass off as spiritual enlightenment disturbed Robinson. In *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), George Santayana writes of Browning in a way that helps to explain Robinson's dislike:

> The impulsive utterances and the crudities of most of the speakers [in Browning's poems] are passionately adopted by the poet as his own. He thus perverts what might have been a triumph of imagination into a failure of reason.
>
> . . . .
>
> The important thing [about love] was to love intensely and to love often. He remained in the phenomenal sphere: he was a lover of experience; the ideal did not exist for him. No conception could be farther from his thought than the essential conception of any rational philosophy, namely, that feeling is to be traced as raw material for thought, and that the destiny of emotion is to pass into objects which shall contain all its value while losing all its formlessness. This transformation of sense and emotion into objects agreeable to the intellect, into clear ideas and beautiful things, is the natural work of reason: when it has been accomplished very imperfectly, or not at all, we have a barbarous mind, a mind full of chaotic sensations, objectless passions, and undigested ideas. Such a mind Browning's was, to a degree remarkable in one with so rich a heritage of civilization. (193-94, 198)

Similar observations might be made of Ezra Pound, who was a great admirer of Browning. Robinson's mild criticism of Browning's "easy optimism" and his implicit insistence on "experience and observation" demonstrate the civilised and rational quality of his mind. They also qualify his so-called mysticism into a rational, if vague, theology. "Mysticism," Santayana informs us, "makes us proud and happy to renounce the work of intelligence, both in thought and in life, and persuades us that we become divine by remaining imperfectly human. Walt Whitman gives us a new expression to this ancient and multiform tendency" (187). But Robinson does not.

"The Man Against the Sky" (1916) probably presents the greatest challenge to doubts about Robinson's alleged mysticism. It is remarkable that so impressive a contemplative poem as "Hillcrest" was written by the same author as "The Man Against the Sky"; it is more remarkable that they appeared in the same volume, and that that volume was almost inexplicably given the title of the far inferior poem. Robinson had something of a prejudice for his long poems over his shorter ones, which may have been related to the Victorian prejudice for long "philosophical" poems, though Robinson did not think of himself as a philosophical poet. In any case, "The Man Against the Sky" is a poor philosophical poem. The lines that seem most clearly to proclaim Robinson a mystic come at the beginning of the second last verse paragraph:

> Where was he going, this man against the sky?
> You know not, nor do I.
> But this we know, if we know anything:
> That we may laugh and fight and sing
> And of our transience here make offering
> To an orient Word that will not be erased,
> Or, save in incommunicable gleams
> Too permanent for dreams,
> Be found or known. (*CP* 66)

This is an imperfect and unsatisfactory statement of belief. It is unimpressive as verse (note, for instance, that the rhymes are incidental, not used[51]), and it is careless in thought. That it is in verse does not distinguish the thought; in fact, some of Robinson's letters convey his theism and anti-materialism more impressively. The passage might be paraphrased as follows: we do not know what happens to the soul, if indeed there is a soul, after death; but we know that we go through life and may offer our lives to God (or, perhaps, Logos), who is eternal and who, except in brief, intuitive but real moments that can't be explained, we cannot find or know. Three main objections might be raised against this argument. The first is the easy assertion of the "we" in line 3: Robinson does not allow for those who do not "know" what he claims that we all know. The second is related to the first and is part of what we "know": Robinson claims that intuitive knowledge of God or Logos is certain, and seems to imply that we have all experienced the "incommunicable gleams." The third is that Robinson claims, perhaps unintentionally, that we cannot find or know the "Word" "*save* in incommunicable gleams," and thus he implies the invalidity of all forms of religious belief that lay claim to reason. The mysticism, then, is certainly present to an extent. But it is important to recognise, first, that Robinson does not make claims to know what happens to the soul, if there is one, after death, and in fact claims that he and the rest of us do not know; second, that if the intuitive knowledge of the "Word" (which itself may be identified with cosmic reason[52]) is "incommunicable," then nothing certain beyond the knowledge of the existence of divinity can be asserted (and nothing is); and, third, that the entire passage is concerned with what we can know, is an exercise of the intelligence, an attempt to affirm the minimum of knowledge about divinity, rather than to make grand claims for intuition over reason. Furthermore, to the extent that it is a moderate statement of belief, especially when compared with the reckless mysticism of major figures in the Romantic tradition, it reveals Robinson's native reasonableness.

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[51] Hyatt H. Waggoner, in a good essay called "E. A. Robinson: The Cosmic Chill," claims that the breakdown of "The Man Against the Sky" into "rhymed prose . . . is not a 'technical' [failure] but the result of a breakdown of thought and feeling" (151). See Francis J. Murphy, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 148-63.

[52] The first definition of *logos* in *Funk and Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary* is "[t]he creative Word of God, identified with the cosmic reason."

Even in his mystical moments, then, Robinson is preoccupied with understanding. In a letter dated March 15, 1897, and obviously written during a time of great psychic distress, Robinson writes as a man of reason rather than as a mystic. Here is how the letter begins:

> How long do you think a man can live in hell? I think he can live there a good many years—a hundred, perhaps, if his bowels keep in decent order—but he isn't going to have a very good time. No man can have a very good time—of the right sort, at any rate—until he understands things; and how the devil is a man to understand things in an age like this, when the whole trend of popular thought is in the wrong direction—not only that, but proud of the way it is taking? The age is all right, material progress is all right, Herbert Spencer is all right, hell is all right. (*US* 278)

Robinson then dismisses his brief list as "damned uninteresting," and speaks in vague spiritual terms (and they are necessarily vague, given that he was unable to assert a particular religious faith) of being able to "get a glimpse of the real light"—a notoriously vague Robinsonianism—"through the clouds of time" (278-79). But it is his reason at work when he insists on the importance of understanding, as it is when he goes on to dismiss suicide as a possibility (279). He also speaks of requiring all his "best strength" to keep his "thoughts in some sort of rational order," announces that he is "going to lose all those pleasures which are said to make up the happiness of life," renounces such pleasures for "a joy" that he has "found a way to . . . through idealism," and claims to have considered Christian Science but finds it an "impossible" course because it is "too dependent on unsubstantial inferences" (279-80). In short, although Robinson may have been something of a mystic, or may have resigned himself to the label "mystic" simply because he was unable to "prove all his convictions to be true" (see p. 199 above), he was an eminently rational man bent on understanding.

The vast majority of the poems, and all of the best ones, say as much. "Luke Havergal" (*The Children of the Night*, 1897) for instance, is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker, apparently a ghost, urges Luke Havergal to suicide. Stanza 3 is the most relevant for our purposes:

> Out of a grave I come to tell you this,
> Out of a grave I come to quench the kiss
> That flames upon your forehead with a glow
> That blinds you to the way that you must go.
> Yes, there is yet one way to where she is,
> Bitter, but one that faith may never miss.
> Out of a grave I come to tell you this—
> To tell you this. (*CP* 74-5)

The identity of the ghost is not clear from the rest of the poem, but from this stanza we can gather that the speaker is either the spirit, or the presumed spirit, of the dead lover, who will, it promises, be resurrected should Luke Havergal follow the course of action urged, or the speaker is the spirit, or presumed spirit, of a third party. Robinson wrote other poems, including "The Whip" (*The Town Down the River*, 1910), *Lancelot* (1920), "Mortmain" (*Dionysus in Doubt*, 1925), *Tristram* (1927), and *Matthias at the Door* (1931), in which the love of two characters is disrupted or hindered by a third party,[53] and some such thing may be going on in "Luke Havergal." The more important point, though, is that the speaker from a human perspective appears to be an agent of evil, and from a perspective beyond the human may well be one. Robinson does not himself assert, and does not have Luke Havergal receive, reassuring, certain knowledge as to a beneficent or blissful existence beyond the grave. Instead, the "faith" (line 6) that the speaker encourages is an endorsement of despair.

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[53] Chard Powers Smith wishes us to see implicit in many if not most of Robinson's poems the working out of his disappointment at the loss of Emma Shepherd to his brother, Herman. *Where the Light Falls*, however, is disappointing as biography, unhelpful as criticism, and worthless as fiction.

A poem in which suicide is not only considered but carried out is "The Mill" (*The Three Taverns*, 1920), which is rightly said by Donald E. Stanford in *Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry* (1985) to have an "extremely plain style" (156):

> The miller's wife had waited long,
>   The tea was cold, the fire was dead;
> And there might yet be nothing wrong
>   In how he went and what he said:
> "There are no millers any more,"
>   Was all that she had heard him say;
> And he had lingered at the door
>   So long that it seemed yesterday.
>
> Sick with a fear that had no form
>   She knew that she was there at last;
> And in the mill there was a warm
>   And mealy fragrance of the past.
> What else there was would only seem
>   To say again what he had meant;
> And what was hanging from a beam
>   Would not have heeded where she went.
>
> And if she thought it followed her,
>   She may have reasoned in the dark
> That one way of the few there were
>   Would hide her and would leave no mark:
> Black water, smooth above the weir
>   Like starry velvet in the night,
> Though ruffled once, would soon appear
>   The same as ever to the sight. (*CP* 460-61)

The poem is moving both despite and because of its extreme restraint. The subject might have been sentimentalised, but it is not. Similarly, "The Mill" is objective without being clinical. It displays what Winters calls Robinson's "plain honesty" or, in connection with the style of Crabbe, his "prosaic honesty" (*EAR* 2, 19). Louise Bogan had poems like this one and "Luke Havergal" in mind when she spoke, in *Achievement in American Poetry, 1900-1950* (1951), of Robinsonian characters—"[t]he secret dreamer, the lonely old roisterer, the enigmatic dandy, the baffled lover, the cynic and the suicide"—who "are filled with an acute but ambiguous bitterness, and at the same time are touched in with the utmost delicacy and tenderness of understanding" (20). The understanding in such a poem as this involves sympathy for the characters and a refusal to pass judgement on their desperate actions, despite the evidence we have that Robinson could not have philosophically endorsed those actions. This refusal, as well as something of the restrained tone of the poem, is echoed in a letter (11 June 1921) concerning a friend's suicide: "So peace to him, wherever and whatever he is now. There was much in him that was good, and the rest is not, as you say, our affair" (*SL* 126). In "The Mill," plainness, evident in both the language and the narrative or structure, is essential to the understanding and to the feelings produced in the reader. The theme of the poem is a domestic tragedy, and woe and wonder[54] are appropriately produced in the reader on the domestic level. Robinson gets right what we have seen Whitman got wrong. Whereas Robinson respects the individuality of his characters in feeling sympathy for them, Whitman fails to do this and so falls into sentimentality. Robinson feels *with* his characters and urges us to do the same; Whitman, as D. H. Lawrence points out, feels *for*, or, when he seeks an illicit union with them, even *as*, his characters (or, rather, his "people," for *characters* is too complete a term for those we encounter in Whitman's poetry).

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[54] Woe and wonder are Shakespeare's terms. See Cunningham's *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*, in *The Collected Essays*, 1-129.

"The Mill" impresses us as a plain narrative and as an instance of Robinson's compassion, but it lacks what Winters refers to in connection with "Eros Turannos" as the "generalizing power" (*EAR* 33) of his best poems. In Robinson's sober, quiet, contemplative voice, "Hillcrest" presents such power. The poem arose out of Robinson's experiences at the MacDowell Colony, a retreat for artists near Peterborough, New Hampshire; Hillcrest is the name of the MacDowell house:

No sound of any storm that shakes
Old island walls with older seas
Comes here where now September makes
An island in a sea of trees.

Between the sunlight and the shade
A man may learn till he forgets
The roaring of a world remade,
And all his ruins and regrets;

And if he still remembers here
Poor fights he may have won or lost,—
If he be ridden with the fear
Of what some other fight may cost,—

If, eager to confuse too soon,
What he has known with what may be,
He reads a planet out of tune
For cause of his jarred harmony,—

If here he venture to unroll
His index of adagios,
And he be given to console
Humanity with what he knows,—

He may by contemplation learn
A little more than what he knew,
And even see great oaks return
To acorns out of which they grew.

He may, if he but listen well,
Through twilight and the silence here,
Be told what there are none may tell
To vanity's impatient ear;

And he may never dare again
Say what awaits him, or be sure
What sunlit labyrinth of pain
He may not enter and endure.

Who knows to-day from yesterday
May learn to count no thing too strange:
Love builds of what Time takes away,
Till Death itself is less than Change.

Who sees enough in his duress
May go as far as dreams have gone;
Who sees a little may do less
Than many who are blind have done;

Who sees unchastened here the soul
Triumphant has no other sight
Than has a child who sees the whole
World radiant with his own delight.

Far journeys and hard wandering
Await him in whose crude surmise
Peace, like a mask, hides everything
That is and has been from his eyes;

And all his wisdom is unfound,
Or like a web that error weaves
On airy looms that have a sound
No louder now than falling leaves. (*CP* 15-17)

Although "Hillcrest" arose out of Robinson's experience, it is a triumph of generalisation rather than particularity, though particular details, when they do occur, as in the first, sixth, eighth, and last stanzas, are impressive for their ingenuity and pertinence. Hillcrest, we are told in the first stanza, provides a place of refuge. But although "A man may learn till he forgets" the world and his troubles (stanza 2), Hillcrest presents an opportunity for learning, or understanding, rather than escape. Stanzas 3 through 6 tell us that if a man still remembers, despite the opportunity to forget, personal struggles, or still fears future struggles, or has, because of past joys or successes, premature expectations of the future, or hopes to benefit mankind by means of his personal endowments, then contemplation will teach him "A little more that what he knew" about himself, and he may even gain humility. The first six stanzas, then, argue that true understanding of life comes through a process of contemplation in which particular, or personal, circumstances are minimised.

It should also be noted that no particular process of contemplation is given preference; Robinson advocates contemplation generally and thus allows for the possible ascertainment of truth from a multiplicity of traditions, including mystical ones. Stanza 7 stresses the need for attentiveness, humility, and patience. Stanza 8 relates two of the benefits to be gained from the contemplative life: that amount of wisdom that makes one cautious about presuming to know what this life holds and, especially, what death means to the soul; and the ability to endure suffering, perhaps through the comfort offered by the thought of immortality, but at any rate out of courage and dignity. There is a noticeable lessening of concentration in the first two lines of stanza 9, but the concentration of the last two lines of stanza 8 returns in the last two of 9. Stanza 9 tells us that whoever knows what it is for time to pass and things to change will be able to understand that Love, which grows from the particularities of human experience, is a timeless absolute; it is an abstract concept whose reality diminishes Death, which may be the means to another kind of existence but in any case is an aspect of Change, which, like Love, is an absolute. The previous stanzas argue the necessity of impersonality, or humility, and of endurance, both of which may be found through contemplation, for the purpose of apprehending abstract concepts. The rest of the poem addresses the problem of right perception; having the opportunity to gain understanding through contemplation does not ensure its attainment. Winters provides a useful summary of the poem:

> As a statement of principles, the poem represents a pretty explicit negation of the essential ideas of the romantic movement, especially as that movement has been represented by the Emersonian tradition: it tells us that life is a very trying experience, to be endured only with pain and to be understood only with difficulty; that easy solutions are misleading; that all solutions must be scrutinized; and that understanding is necessary. It is a poem on the tragedy of human life and on the

> value of contemplation; it expresses neither despair or triumph, but rather recognition and evaluation. (*EAR* 30-1)

That life, however, is "to be endured *only* with pain" would seem to call for qualification, since the poem's most important abstraction, "Love," offers the possibility of alleviating suffering.

The last two lines of stanza 9—"Love builds of what Time takes away, / Till Death itself is less than Change"—appear to support Robinson's numerous claims (in the letters) to be an idealist. But given the evidence in this and other poems, given Robinson's insistence on "experience and observation" (p. 199 above), and given the consensus of the critics, we should not take Robinson's frequent use of the word *idealism* in the strictest philosophical sense. Rather, we should interpret it in the context of Robinson's constant embattlement with the ethos of materialism that shaped the modern world. "Hillcrest " itself does not present an idealism that excludes the world of things from having reality outside of the apprehension of them. That from which "Love builds" is not slighted; and, as the penultimate stanza suggests, the proper use of the peace that comes from understanding, or from contemplation, does not allow for the turning from "everything / That is and has been." Robinson, that is to say, was a realist, and even as "idealistic" a poem as "Hillcrest" proves it.[55]

"Hillcrest" is a successful contemplative poem, and a large part of its success is due to its plainness. The lines that Winters has objected to as facile (*EAR* 30)—"If first he venture to unroll / His index of adagios"—impinge somewhat on its claims to plainness because of the contrived figure and the

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[55] Joyce Kilmer, in a 1912 review, claims that Robinson "is a realist in the proper meaning of the word; not a nominalist" (Cary, *Early Reception* 237). W. R. Robinson, on the other hand, insists that Robinson was a nominalist in his "attitude toward language," a nominalist "of the Duns Scotus variety," though at the same time a realist of a "profound kind" (*EAR: A Poetry of the Act* , 52 ff.).

Latinate diction, and, as well, the descriptive nature of the first and the last stanzas qualify the plainness in a positive way. The description is not ornamental, but it modifies by sensible, or sensuous, means what Edwin S. Fussell has called Robinson's "conversational and argumentative manner" (Murphy 99). We have seen that the diction ("laurel," "flicker," "flame") of "George Crabbe" does much the same sort of thing. The method, whether it is used by Ben Jonson or by Robinson, is one that depends upon the solid foundation that a masterful plain style provides. The poet is able to depart from a strict plainness of statement without becoming decorative—if, that is, his meaning, or matter, takes precedence over the sensuousness or figurativeness of his words. This method is imperfectly employed in the octave of "Souvenir" (*The Three Taverns*, 1920), where details more or less Romantic in origin—"a glimmering window overhung / With honeysuckle wet with evening dew," "dusky dahlias," "shadowy hydrangeas," and "a blurred bat"—are used to give a sense of mystery to the description of a "vanished house" in which someone long ago lay dying (*CP* 509). In the sestet, Robinson turns to his more typical language of plain statement and, except for the word "occupation" in the last line, is wholly successful. However, throughout "The Sheaves" (*Dionysus in Doubt*, 1925), there is a superbly handled combination of styles reminiscent of Jonson, if the descriptive details owe something to Romanticism:

> Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled,
> Green wheat was yielding to the change assigned;
> And as by some vast magic undivined
> The world was turning slowly into gold.
>
> Like nothing that was ever bought or sold
> It waited there, the body and the mind;
> And with a mighty meaning of a kind
> That tells the more the more it is not told.
>
> So in a land where all days are not fair,

> Fair days went on till on another day
> A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,
> Shining and still, but not for long to stay—
> As if a thousand girls with golden hair
> Might rise from where they slept and go away. (*CP* 870-71)

It is not the golden style of the sixteenth century, for the description is not ornamental but essential; it is not as though a seventeenth-century poet trained in the classical plain style were cleverly employing the golden style, for the sense of mystery regarding the transformation of the wheat is not disburdened by Christian doctrine, and the poem is essentially descriptive; nor could it be a sonnet by a Romantic poet, for it is more intent upon the rational handling of the subject than one would expect from a Romantic poet, and the second quatrain is concerned not just with the mystery of the "mighty meaning," but with explicitly opposing modern materialism. "The Sheaves" is wonderfully descriptive and yet presents, especially in the middle two lines of the first quatrain and the first two of the second, a compact argument favouring a spiritual interpretation of the essence of the universe. The poem constitutes a fairly explicit statement of belief informed by the close observation of particular details, and yet it is also a golden poem.

The observations of particular details that Robinson makes in his poems are Robinsonian observations. Similarly, the impersonality is of a Robinsonian variety. The observations, indeed, are the *personal* observations of E. A. Robinson, the self-styled "provincial" from Gardiner, Maine, who lived to write and wrote that he, and others, might understand. His observations tell us what that man Robinson, a product of his particular time and place, saw and what he thought about things. But the poems are not much concerned, from what we can gather and as Robinson himself asserted, with the poet's personal experiences. He put it this way in the letter in which he spoke of the "few inevitable words" (11 July 1917): "While nearly everything that I have written has a certain amount of personal coloring, I do not recall anything of mine that is a direct transcription of experience" (*SL* 103). The poems are both personal and impersonal. Truth being his ultimate goal, he found that plainness was fundamental to its achievement. His observations, whether of an intellectual or a sensory sort, would be treated plainly, out of a certain respect for the poet's task as he understood it, and for the reader. This approach allowed for a considerable variety of poetic techniques and for an impressive stylistic flexibility. In the short poems, the style ranges from the moral style of "George Crabbe," to the plain narration of a poem like "The Mill," to the modulated plainness of "The Sheaves," to the plain treatment of philosophical subject matter in "Hillcrest," and to the polished urbanity of "Veteran Sirens" (*The Man Against the Sky*, 1916), one of Robinson's greatest achievements:

> The ghost of Ninon would be sorry now
> To laugh at them, were she to see them here,
> So brave and so alert for learning how
> To fence with reason for another year.
>
> Age offers a far comelier diadem
> Than theirs; but anguish has no eye for grace,
> When time's malicious mercy cautions them
> To think a while of number and of space.
>
> The burning hope, the worn expectancy,
> The martyred humor, and the maimed allure,
> Cry out for time to end his levity,
> And age to soften its investiture;
>
> But they, though others fade and are still fair,
> Defy their fairness and are unsubdued;
> Although they suffer, they may not forswear
> The patient ardor of the unpursued.
>
> Poor flesh, to fight the calendar so long;
> Poor vanity, so quaint and yet so brave;
> Poor folly, so deceived and yet so strong,
> So far from Ninon and so near the grave. (*CP* 40)

Toward the very end of "The Man Against the Sky" Robinson asks,

> If after all that we have lived and thought,
> All comes to Nought,—
> If there be nothing after Now,
> And we be nothing anyhow,
> And we know that—why live? (*CP* 68-9)

It is a rhetorical question in prosy verse. Robinson knew that the answer was that life constitutes a moral imperative, a moral obligation to endure whatever it brings, and he knew that at least part, and a sufficient part, of the answer to a related question that plagued him—why are we here?—is that we are here for each other, no matter what death might mean. A poem like "Veteran Sirens," a supremely humane and civilised work of art, and perhaps the most classical of Robinson's poems in style and ripeness of understanding, reflects these answers in every line. It also substantiates the philosophical and stylistic implications of the following lines, quoted but unidentified by Hagedorn (103) and exhibiting—in contrast to "Veteran Sirens"—a Crabbean plainness in Wordsworthian blank verse; they are, nevertheless, typical Robinson:

> "To mortal ears the plainest word may ring
> Fantastic and unheard-of, and as false
> And out of tune as ever to our own
> Did ring the prayers of man-made maniacs;
> But if that word be the plain word of Truth,
> It leaves an echo that begets itself,
> Persistent in itself and of itself,
> Regenerate, reiterate, replete."

IV

Pound: "Make It New," Make It Plain;
or
The Founding of a Modern, Primitive Plainness

> [P]rimitivism is the end of the line. Its roots are old, as old as our culture's distrust of the mind, but the implications are stark: when primitivism ceases to be an eccentric response of

> individuals, but becomes the general state of the literary intellectuals, the effort to sustain our historic connection with the culture of the past will have been abandoned. Primitivism is inimical to the historical sense, for if ritual and custom are the only arbiters of social behaviour there is no meaningful escape from their tyranny. . . . The primitivists promise a long holiday from reality; it is a measure of our social crisis that they speak with such unmerited assurance.
>
> —Eric Homberger, *The Art of the Real* (199-200)

> The Englishwoman, looking up at my lofty and ragged mock orange, said, 'You Americans like your nature rather . . . wild, do you not?' I suspect that she was making a conventional observation, yet it is still one truth about us that many Americans have a liking for the rough and unpruned—a liking for the wild which goes far beyond that "picturesque" aesthetic still visible in so much English parkland. It is a taste with political overtones, having to do with freedom and self-realization, and it also entails an atavistic gesture toward the frontier.
>
> —Richard Wilbur, *Responses* (155-56)

> The plainness of plain things is savagery,
> As: the last plainness of a man who has fought
> Against illusion . . . .
>
> —Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Night in New Haven," IV (*CP* 467)

Our conscious awareness of the connection between plainness and primitivism or barbarism or "savagery" has developed over the past two hundred years, since the advent of Romanticism. The somewhat cryptic lines from Wallace Stevens (their meaning would not be clarified by quoting further) makes explicit this connection, which is implicit, or incipient, in the quotation from Richard Wilbur. Eric Homberger points to one of the serious dangers of primitivism—that because of the attraction it holds for us, it threatens to dissolve our "historical sense" and therefore our ability to make distinctions and to evaluate the past. Primitivism thus poses a threat to civilisation, but, in modern times at least, only when it is engendered *within* civilisation. The truly primitive man no longer poses a threat to civilised ways of life (whereas, too often in the name of "progress," we continue to threaten his way of life); it is the primitivistic civilised man who sometimes poses a threat: as Wilbur says elsewhere in *Responses*, "One can, within limits, argue with a wild man; wild men are simple; but there's no arguing with a subtle and reasonable man bent on being wild." From a certain limited perspective, it is easy to see how Ezra Pound appears to have been just such a man. What complicates matters is that he was an indefatigable spokesman for civilisation, even if sometimes this meant no more than propagandising for one or another of his hobbyhorses. But he was also a sometime proponent of "literary" violence (or tough talk), as opposed to the real thing,[56] and a staunch supporter of Mussolini. Wilbur's anecdote about his mock orange, or syringa, recalls the words of Perry Miller quoted at the beginning of Chapter Two (p. 71) and stands as a well-meaning defense of the civilised American primitivism represented by Whitman and others, before and since, writing in the Emersonian tradition. Pound, with his love of brawn and tough talk, fits into that tradition, despite his early effete aestheticism and T. S. Eliot's misleading and rather too insistent denial of Whitman's influence on his friend,[57] whom the dedication to *The Waste Land* refers to as the better craftsman ("*il miglior fabbro*"). But it is important to notice about Wilbur's anecdote that, first, he is careful to say that "many," not all, Americans like "the wild"; and, second, he makes a somewhat easy and unexplained connection between feeling attracted to "the wild" and having strong convictions about "freedom and self-realization." What Wilbur and others perceive as the "political overtones" of being attracted to wildness, or the primitive life, is bolstered by the simple fact that the wilderness that once was America provided a political and, more often, religious sanctuary for many of its early European settlers. But there is a danger here of feeling that one who does not make this connection, who, say, is more repulsed by the wild than attracted to it, cannot really believe in "freedom and self-realization," is not quite American. There is also the danger that the artist will be conceived as American insofar as he or she realises the political aims of "freedom and self-realization," which, of course, will have certain aesthetic or artistic overtones having to do with "the rough and unpruned—. . . the wild."

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[56] Discussing Maude Gonne in a letter to John Quinn (15 November 1918), Pound lamented the fact that "[t]here are people who have no sense of the value of 'civilization' or public order" (*Selected Letters* , hereafter *SL*, 140). Pound put *civilization* in quotation marks because his usual use of the word involves an appreciation for civilised art; he appears to take "public order" for granted. Despite this, he often advocated violence, but, unlike his associate T. E. Hulme, was likely incapable of carrying out some of his proposals, such as the killing of Henry Seidel Canby, editor of *Atlantic Monthly* (see "The Teacher's Mission," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, hereafter *LE*, 58). Such proposals are not serious, but they are disturbingly irresponsible. Others, such as his intention "to save the public's soul by punching its face" (*SL* 13), may be somewhat distasteful but are also motivated by admirable ideals. Pound himself perhaps best sums up his ambiguous attitude toward violence in a long letter to Felix E. Schelling (8-9 July 1922): ". . . I think *Lustra* has done a work of purgation of minds, meritorious as the physical products of Beecham. Being intemperate, at moments, I shd. prefer dynamite, but in measured moments I know that all violence is useless (even the violence of language . . .)" (*SL* 181-82).

[57] Pound expressed his aestheticism by, among other things, sporting an emerald earring when a young dandy in Paris. Eliot's insistent denial of Whitman's influence ("there is not a trace of him anywhere; Whitman and Mr Pound are antipodean to each other") can be found in *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology* (hereafter *EP*), p. 77. Eliot's reliance upon

One of the most fascinating things about Pound is that, as a tireless promoter of poetry, poetic theories, and art in general, he can be seen, and saw himself, as a defender of civilisation and a believer in "freedom and self-realization." To be sure, there is abundant evidence to support this view: in a letter of 1918 to John Quinn he claimed that Maude Gonne's "only constructive political idea is that Ireland and the rest of the world should be one large Donegal fair"; in a 1931 letter to Harriet Monroe he proclaimed himself "a democrat" (even though he qualified this with, "but one must observe the general current of things"); and in one to Eliot in 1940 he implies a lack of interest in "savages" but states a profound "interest in civilizations at their

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unargued insistence betrays a certain nervousness on the part of one upon whom the influence of Pound was substantial.

most" (*SL* 140, 233, 336). But then there is the violence already mentioned, the Fascism, and the anti-semitism, all of which support the view of commentators as distinguished as Robert Graves, F. R. Leavis, Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, and, more recently, Michael H. Levenson that Pound's is a poetry of barbarism or primitivism, or that, in the words of Tate, "[o]ne is entitled to the suspicion that Mr. Pound prefers barbarism [to civilisation], and that by taking up the role of revolution against it he has bitten off his nose to spite his face" (*CE* 356).[58] There are also more subtle ways in which primitivism (a more accurate descriptive term for the present purposes than barbarism) is at work in the poetry and poetic theories of Pound, and it is with some of these—specifically, his indebtedness to Whitman, his modernization, and, most importantly and interestingly, his theories of Imagism, Vorticism, and the ideogram—that the rest of this chapter will deal. It will be argued that fundamental to the primitivism and the most important poetic theories of Pound is the principle of plainness.

i

Pound's Indebtedness to Whitman

Pound was certainly amongst the earliest of commentators to recognise his indebtedness to Whitman, and he did so with characteristic honesty in an essay of 1909:

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[58] As well as Tate's discussion in his *Collected Essays* (350-57), see Leavis' sobering discussion of Pound's failure to understand culture and civilisation—Pound was a "barbarian, one is inclined to say, but the barbarians had cultures in precisely the sense that Pound remained unaware of" (*EP* 217-22); Graves' contemptuous dismissal—"Pound had no inkling of English tradition," and (on a passage from the *Cantos*) "[e]ven Whitman's barbaric yawp was hardly as barbaric as that" (*EP* 222-26; Winters' discussion of Pound as a primitive in *Primitivism and Decadence* (*In Defense of Reason*); and Levenson's discussion of the "rabid" primitivism of Pound and Lewis and Pound's "anti-democratic" and "anti-humanitarian" position in his valuable study *A Genealogy of Modernism* (especially 75-76, 206-07).

> Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both). Personally I might be very glad to conceal my relationship to my spiritual father and brag about my more congenial ancestry—Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon, but the descent is a bit difficult to establish. And, to be frank, Whitman is to my fatherland . . . what Dante is to Italy and I at my best can only be a strife [*sic*] for a renaissance in America of all the lost or temporarily mislaid beauty, truth, valor, glory of Greece, Italy, England and all the rest of it. (*Selected Prose* 115-16)

Despite this admission, Pound continued for some time to be embarrassed by his kinship to Whitman. This poem, first published as "A Truce" in *Lustra* (1916), had its title changed to "A Pact" for the *Collected Shorter Poems* (1952):

> I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—
> I have detested you long enough.
> I come to you as a grown child
> Who has had a pig-headed father;
> I am old enough now to make friends.
> It was you that broke the new wood,
> Now is a time for carving.
> We have one sap and one root—
> Let there be commerce between us. (*Selected Poems* 27[59])

Pound's early detestation of Whitman was that of the young aesthete intent upon craft. He wrote to Harriet Monroe (13 October 1912) of his series of poems called "Contemporania" (*Poetry*, April 1913) that

> [i]t has been my hope that this work will help to break the surface of convention and that the raw matter, and analysis of primitive systems may be of use in building the new art of metrics and of words [*sic*].
>
> The "Yawp" is respected from Denmark to Bengal, but we can't stop with the "Yawp." We have no longer any excuse for not taking up the complete art. (*SL* 11)

The loose, very loose, metre of "A Pact" is like the more controlled Whitman, but if, in comparison, say, with *anything* written by Robinson, there is little evidence of concern for, let alone mastery of, "the complete art," there is nevertheless more attention to structure than Whitman ordinarily displays. The first two lines constitute a plain—flat, in fact, but their flatness is qualified by the Whitmanian directness—statement; the next three develop the child-father metaphor; lines 6 and 7 take up the metaphor of "the new wood"; and the last two lines constitute an adequate summary and inconspicuously combine the child-father with the "new wood" metaphor. The language is that of plain talk and is even colloquial ("pig-headed father," "make friends") in a Whitmanian way. It also verges on cliché, but Pound has been careful to make new metaphors out of old, stock phrases. For we do not usually break "new wood" but new ground, and we usually find "a time" for sowing and for reaping, rather than for "carving." Thus, though Pound has "made it new," he has done so while retaining a colloquial, Whitmanian ease.

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[59] Hereafter, page numbers following quotations from the poems will refer to the *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. Citations to the *Collected Shorter Poems* will be abbreviated *CSP*; those to the *Collected Early Poems*, *CEP*.

It has been noted by numerous commentators, notably R. P. Blackmur in the very useful "Masks of Ezra Pound" (*EP* 143-72), that Pound is at his best when translating or adopting the methods of another. Whitman is such another no less than Sextus Propertius and Li Po, as the opening of the early poem "From Chebar" (*CEP 269*) amply demonstrates:

> Before you were, America!
>
> I did not begin with you,
> I do not end with you, America.
>
> You are the present veneer.

Pound mastered Whitman's "anti-rhetorical" rhetoric perhaps better than he mastered any other poetic technique.[60] But, as the lines quoted demonstrate,

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[60] His most Whitmanian poem is probably "Commission" (*Lustra*, 1916), whose lines include:

> Go, my songs, to the lonely and the unsatisfied,
> Go also to the nerve-racked, go to the enslaved-by-
> convention,
> Bear to them my contempt for their oppressors.
> Go as a great wave of cool water,

he used that rhetoric for his own purposes. Later in the poem he makes explicit his intention to go beyond Whitman, even though he does so in Whitmanian lines:

> I have not forgotten the birthright.
> I am not content that you should be always a province.
> The will is not enough,
> The pretence is not enough,
> The satisfaction-in-ignorance is insufficient.
>
> There is no use your quoting Whitman against me,
> His time is not our time, his day and hour were different.
> (*CEP* 271)

The prosiness of these lines recall not only Whitman but Pound's famous remark that "[p]oetry must be *as well written as prose*," which is not to say that these lines are good as either prose or poetry, but merely that the relative plainness of modern prose was a standard that Pound constantly had in mind—at least, this was the case by the time the consciously modern *Ripostes* (1912) appeared.

The letter, to Harriet Monroe (January 1915), in which appears the remark about poetry being as well written as prose[22] goes on as follows:

> Its language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (i.e. simplicity). There

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Bear my contempt of oppressors.

Speak against unconscious oppression,

. . . .

Go to the bourgeoise who is dying of her ennuis,
Go to the women in suburbs.
Go to the hideously wedded,
Go to them whose failure is concealed,
Go to the unluckily mated,
Go to the bought wife,
Go to the woman entailed.

Go to those who have a delicate lust . . . . (*CSP* 97)

And so on it goes.

[22] This remark first appeared, however, in "The Prose Tradition in Verse," *Poetry*, 1914 (*LE* 373).

> must be no book words, no periphrases, no inversions. It must be as simple as Du Maupassant's best prose, and as hard as Stendhal's.
>
> . . . .
>
> Rhythm MUST have meaning. It can't be merely a careless dash off, . . . a tumty tum tumty tum tum ta.
>
> There must be no clichés, set phrases, stereotyped journalese. The only escape from such is by precision, a result of concentrated attention to what is writing.
>
> Objectivity and again objectivity, and expression: no hindside-beforeness, no straddled adjectives (as "addled mosses dank"), no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing—nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Every literaryism, every book word, fritters away a scrap of the reader's patience, a scrap of his sense of your sincerity. When one really feels and thinks, one stammers with simple speech; it is only in the flurry, the shallow frothy excitement of writing, or the inebriety of a metre, that one falls into the easy—oh, how easy!—speech of books and poems that one has read.
>
> Language is made out of concrete things. General expressions in non-concrete terms are a laziness; they are talk, not art, not creation. They are the reaction of things on the writer, not a creative act *by* the writer. (*SL* 48-9)

Section iii of this discussion will address the so-called concreteness of language mentioned in the last paragraph quoted. There is much in the entire passage, including the emphasis on the creativity of the writer in the last paragraph, to link Pound's poetic program with that of Wordsworth, as well as Whitman, and the principles he points to are not to be dismissed as simply having been mentioned in a letter. Pound's letters are an important resource for understanding his ideas; moreover, he stressed these principles throughout his mature years as a poet. The principles that link him with Wordsworth and Whitman include the call for a "heightened intensity" (rather oddly equated with "simplicity," probably in the effort to distinguish the phrase from a highly rhetorical poetry), the insistence upon what Wordsworth calls, in the 1815 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "language really used by men," or upon simplicity of diction and syntax, and upon sincerity, or what Whitman liked to call candour. Like Wordsworth, too, Pound tended to regard the language of poetry as identical to that of prose, though his emphasis on "hardness" and "objectivity" go beyond his Romantic forebear's particular prescription for plainness.

Of crucial importance is the statement "[r]hythm MUST have meaning." That Pound took the importance of meaning itself more or less for granted is evident in his famous definition, "[g]reat literature is language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (*LE* 23). His demand that rhythm have meaning is a tribute to the seriousness with which he took the art of poetry, but it is difficult to see how rhythm by itself can be said to be meaningful, at least in any definable sense. Like his call for hardness, Pound's demand that rhythm be meaningful arose from his disenchantment with late-nineteenth-century Romantic softness in poetry. It might be said that the rhythm of any good poem has "meaning" insofar as we are able to say that the rhythm *complements* the meaning of the words, or argument. Thus, the rhythm of Christopher Marlowe's golden-style poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" might be said to complement the Shepherd's argument, no less than Sir Walter Ralegh's moral, or native plain style, poem "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" has a rhythm that complements the Nymph's argument, despite the fact that both arguments are written in the same metre.[61] Pound's emphasis on meaning is one that he shares with all poets and theorists concerned with plainness—from George Gascoigne to John Dryden, from Emerson to Whitman. But his expression of that emphasis shows that he differs from almost all such poets and theorists who came before him (Whitman is the notable exception) in that he appears to have moved toward the rejection of metre: rhythm "can't be merely a careless dash off, . . . a tumty tum tumty tum tum ta," and one must be wary of "the inebriety of a metre," lest one fall "into the easy—oh, how easy!—speech of books and poems that one has read."

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[61] See C. Q. Drummond's excellent discussion of these poems in "Style in Ralegh's Short Poems," *South Central Review* no vol., no d.: 23-26.

Pound's remarks elsewhere on the traditional use of metre suggest a mechanical reading of the metrical line. Typical of his remarks is his depiction, in his *ABC of Reading*, of the pentameter line as consisting of an "alternating heaviness of syllables,

> specifically:
> ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum

from which every departure is treated as an exception" (203-04). As Timothy Steele aptly puts it in his distinguished study *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* (1990), this remark and others of a similar nature, including the third rule of Imagism, "compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome" ("A Retrospect," *LE* 3), "misconstrues traditional metrical practice," for "[g]ood poets do not write in a foot by foot or metronomic manner":

> Pound's ti-tumming accounts for the metrical norm of the pentameter line and for the way a student might scan or read the line to bring out its metrical identity. But the ti-tumming does not account for the necessary and happily infinite varieties of rhythmical contour (and they are not "exceptions") that can exist within the norm of the conventional pentameter. (60-61)

Steele goes on to translate from the Latin Julius Caesar Scaliger's sound observations on the distinction between metre and rhythm: "'The measure of the verse is invariable, its rhythm variable. . . . It will be therefore the Measure that determines its extent. Rhythm on the other hand determines its temperament" (61). Pound, however, appears to have been displeased that anything but the *meaning* should determine the rhythm, and to have feared that metre could do this, could, that is, take the place of meaning. He is thus aligned with Whitman in rejecting metre as essential to poetic composition, and did so in part for Whitman's reason that metre belonged to another time and place (specifically, in Whitman's terms, to "feudal" Europe). But he also rejected it (despite the fact that he would always return to metre) because of the perceived imposition upon rhythm and, since rhythm ought to be meaningful, therefore upon meaning.

Believing that rhythm itself is meaningful leads to Pound's claim that "the Cantos are in a way fugal" (*SL* 294), as well as, it would appear, to the writing of a poem like *Four Quartets*. Pound's understanding of rhythm is related to what he liked to refer to as *melopoeia*, "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning." Hence, "*melopoeia* can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even though he be ignorant of the language in which the poem is written" (*LE* 25). *Melopoeia* is thus apparently nothing more—which is not to slight Pound's very interesting discussions of it—than what we ordinarily mean by rhythm. True, *melopoeia* may have been conceived by Pound as having a meaning that supplements the "plain meaning" of the words, but the phrase "some musical property" suggests that the relationship between the words and the "musical property" is simply that of the conventional one between words and rhythm, in which, as has been said, the latter *complements* the former. It is curious that Pound should claim (in the section called "Language" in Part One of *How to Read*) that "there are three 'kinds of poetry,'" and distinguish them under the titles of *Melopoeia*, *Phanopoeia*, "which is a casting of images upon the visual imagination," and *Logopoeia*, "'the dance of the intellect among the words', that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play" (*LE* 25). It is curious, first, that Pound's categories do not seem to allow for poetry of statement, poetry that employs words primarily "for their direct meaning."[62] Nor do they seem to allow for narrative poems, or, if they do, then Pound would seem to have to commit himself to the view that only those parts of a narrative poem that fit into one of his categories can be truly poetic. Thus, for instance, he values the descriptive passages of Crabbe and rejects the abstract ones. It is also curious that Pound seems satisfied that these "three 'kinds of poetry'" exist as distinct from one another, whereas all good, let alone great, poetry surely partakes of *melopoeia*, or rhythm, in conjunction with meaningful language, and *may* involve *phanopoeia*, *logopoeia*, or both. A poem like Hardy's "During Wind and Rain," for instance, would be impossible without meaningful language and what Pound calls *melopoeia* and *phanopoeia*, not to mention metre. When Pound wrote *How to Read* in the late 1920s he was in part taking a retrospective view of his career as a poet, and his three divisions of poetry account for the kinds of poems he had hitherto written and would care to retain. If the *Cantos* "are in a way fugal," they are also at times phanopoetic, and at others logopoetic, no doubt. Likewise, "A Pact" is a logopoetic poem, while Pound's most famous phanopoetic one is "In a Station of the Metro." However interesting a poem or passage written according to these definitions might be, whatever defense one might make of such a poem or passage, there is no escaping the fact of a certain incompleteness. The theory of these three kinds of poetry would lead, with great and lamentable irony, to the writing of poems by poets who need not be concerned with "taking up the complete art," which Pound demanded in the wake of Whitman's example. Furthermore, the theory is extremely limited because it does not sufficiently address the writing of great poetry; Pound's eye appears to have been directed more toward his own poems and translations than toward the great poems of the past.

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[62] Pound, of course, did advocate directness (which will be taken up in section iii); he even extolled Theophile Gautier, in a 1916 letter to Iris Barry, as "the next man [after Heine] who can write," adding, "[p]erfectly plain statements like his 'Carmen est maigre' should teach one a number of things" (*SL* 89). Also, in a letter of 1918 to John Quinn, he claimed that America has to get used to "perfectly bald statements" (*SL* 138); he was referring to the prose of James Joyce. And in 1920, in a letter to William Carlos Williams, he claimed to have fought "for honest clear statement in verse" (*SL* 157).

There is in Pound's concern for the "meaningfulness" of rhythm a significant connection with Whitman. Whitman sounded his "barbaric yawp"; Pound accepted this but wanted to add a sense of craft to the "yawp." This would presumably dispense with the barbarism. But accepting the "yawp" meant accepting the theory that led to its being (or vice versa). Whitman believed in imitative form, the idea that form must imitate its subject matter. "The great poems, Shakspere included, are poisonous" to democratic America, for they "have had their birth in courts, and bask'd and grown in castle sunshine; all smells of princes' favors" (see p. 100 above). In order to appease the "Genius of these States," the American poet must write in a new way that addresses the facts of American experience; only in this way can his poetry be truly meaningful. Hence, just as the heroic couplet is expressive of Pope's narrow England, and traditional metres are expressive of "feudal" Europe in general, this new, modern way would express the freedom and vitality of the raw republic. That Pound accepted this theory is evident from many statements in the essays and letters,[63] as well as in his acceptance of

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[63] See, for instance, Pound's claim in 1939 that "Aquinas [is] *not* valid now" (*SL* 323), and this intriguing proclamation and confession from a letter to T. C. Wilson dated 30 October 1933, Pound's forty-eighth birthday:

> I don't think there is any chance for *any* yng. feller making a dent in the pubk. or highly select consciousness by means of pomes writ in the style of 1913/15. An thet's flat and no use my handlin you with gloves.
>
> I do not believe there are more than two roads:
>
> 1. The old man's road (vide Tom. Hardy)—CONTENT, the INSIDES, the subject matter.
> 2. Music. And I am slowly gettin round to a few

Whitman's "yawp," his promotion of free verse, however well crafted, his assistance to Eliot as an editor of *The Waste Land*, and his writing of poems like *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), the *Cantos*, or this gay, barbaric yawp:

Ancient Music

Winter is icummen in,
Llude sing Goddamm,
Raineth drop and staineth slop,
And how the wind doth ramm!
                Sing: Goddamm.
Skiddeth bus and sloppeth us,
An ague hath my ham.
Freezeth river, turneth liver,
                Damn you sing: Goddamm
Goddamm, Goddamm, 'tis why I am, Goddamm,
                So 'gainst the winter's balm.
Sing goddamm, damm, sing Goddamm,
Sing goddamm, sing goddamm, DAMM. (*CSP* 127)

The barbarism, the attention to craft, to metre, rhythm, and rhyme, and the intention to "make it new" are all equally obvious, and the poem outdoes Whitman in terms of craft *and* barbarism.

When Pound had something negative to say about Whitman he usually qualified it in such a way as to make it clear that his general and final opinion was that his "spiritual father" was worthy of emulation, though he insisted on refining Whitman's example. Typical of his view of Whitman is his statement in a letter of 1931:

> formulations, shocked largely by the god damn
> ignorance in which I have lived, and which wuz
> inherited from the generation of boobs who preceded me. (*SL* 248-49)

The remark on "the style of 1913/15" is not likely meant as a condemnation of that style, but as a rejection of the possibility of making it pertinent to 1933. It is intriguing, however, that five years after his death Hardy is pointed to by Pound as a poet worthy of study. Then there is a letter to Laurence Binyon, December 30, 1934: "Nobody has taught me anything about writing since Thomas Hardy died. More's the pity" (*SL* 264). It is extraordinary that what Pound learned from Hardy apparently had nothing to do with the necessity of metre and its timeless vitality in the hands of a master. See also *SL* 294: "Doing a note on Hardy (Hardy's *Collected Poems*) for my next prose outbreak. Now *there* is a clarity. There *is* the harvest of having written 20 novels first."

> Danger of Concord school omitting to notice Whitman. Historically, people in rough environment, if they have any sensibility or perception, want "culture an' refinement." Whitman embodying nearly everything one disliked, etc. Failure to see the wood for the trees. (*SL* 234)

The "failure" is that of the "Concord school." Again, Whitman provides the "wood," Pound and his followers the "carving." That Pound specifically had Whitman in mind as he embarked upon the modernization of poetry is clear in a letter of October, 1913 to Alice Corbin Henderson, co-editor of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*:

> I wonder if *Poetry* really dares to devote a number to my *new* work. There'll be a *howl*. They won't like it. It's absolutely the last obsequies of the Victorian period. I won't permit any selection or editing. It stands now a series of 24 poems, most of them very short.
>
> I'd rather they appeared after H[arriet] M[onroe] has published "The Garden" [*Lustra*, 1916] and whatever else of that little lot she cares to print, as a sort of preparation for the oncoming horror. There'll probably be 40 by the time I hear from you. It's not futurism and it's not post-impressionism, but it's work contemporary with those schools and to my mind the most significant that I have yet brought off.
>
> BUTT they won't like it. They won't object as much as they did to Whitman's outrages, because the stamina of stupidity is weaker. I guarantee you *one* thing. The reader will not be *bored*. He will say agh, ahh, ahhh, but-bu-bu-but this isn't Poetry.
>
> . . . .
>
> I expect a number of people will regard the series as pure *blague*. Still, I give you your chance to be modern, to go blindfoldedly to be modern, to produce as many green bilious attacks throughout the length and breadth of the U. S. A. as there are fungoid members of the American academy. I announce the demise of R[obert] U[nderwood] Johnson and all his foetid generation. (*SL* 23-4)

Whitman called his song a "yawp," Pound anticipated that his would set off a "*howl*." Common to both poets is the intention to write in a way "free" of the constricting forms and intentions of previous poetry, and to do this in the conscious attempt to ruffle the "establishment" and stretch the bounds of poetry by writing in an anti-poetical, or anti-rhetorical, way.

It might be argued that Pound is simply *like* Whitman in these various ways and did not follow Whitman's example. Indeed, this would seem to be the case when it comes to the fact that each poet wrote imagistic poetry, looked to nature as a model for his art (that Pound did this will be discussed in section iii), and spent much of his life writing one long poem or poem-sequence—Whitman with *Leaves of Grass*, Pound with the *Cantos*. Such things may to some extent reflect indebtedness but have cogent immediate causes, and, also, might be attributed to what we can now see as a common Romantic tradition. But Pound's own comments on Whitman, as being both his "spiritual father" and America's Dante, compel us to recognise his indebtedness to him. At the very least, that indebtedness involved a desire for "plain talk," an insistence on truth free of "rhetorical din and luxurious riot" ("A Retrospect," *LE* 12), and an acceptance of the theory that could do away with metre and thereby make the plainness of natural speech in poetry possible. Pound speaks disparagingly, in "A Retrospect" (1918), of Shakespeare's time having been an "age of painted speech" (*LE* 10), which is something he hoped to prevent in his own time:

> As to Twentieth century poetry, and the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so, it will, I think, move against poppycock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr Hewlett calls 'nearer the bone'. It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth . . . . We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free of emotional slither. (*LE* 12)

It will, he might have said, be plainer. Pound went beyond Whitman in his call for a plainer poetry in that he wanted hardness and austerity. His desire for plainness derived in part from his weariness with the "emotional slither" in late nineteenth-century, Swinburnean verse, and his vehemence probably derived in part from his having written such verse himself. But Whitman, because of his avowed anti-rhetorical position, his regard for substance over ornament, or matter over words, and his concomitant rejection of metre in the name of natural speech, its rhythms, diction, and syntax, was an important starting point for Pound.

ii

Pound's Modernization

> Complementi, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies, and cogitating an excuse for always exuding my deformative secretions in my own stuff, and never getting an outline. I go into nacre and objets d'art. Some day I shall lose my temper, blaspheme Flaubert, lie like a ---- and say "Art should embellish the umbelicus [*sic*]."
>
> —From a letter to T. S. Eliot regarding
> *The Waste Land*, 24 December, 1921 (*SL* 169)

Flaubert's prose represented a mark of excellence for Pound because of its realism, and the superiority of prose fiction over poetry in the nineteenth century presented an attractive challenge to an ambitious young poet.[64] The challenge was to be met by learning from the masters, as he observes in Part III of *How to Read*:

> During the nineteenth century the superiority, if temporary, is at any rate obvious, and to such degree that I believe no man can now write really good verse unless he knows Stendhal and Flaubert. . . . To put it perhaps more strongly, he will learn more about the art of charging words from Flaubert than he will from the floribund sixteenth-century dramatists. (*LE* 32)

There were precedents for real, or good, writing in nineteenth-century English poetry, as Pound recognises in "Hell," a review of Laurence Binyon's translation of the *Inferno*, and first published in *The Criterion* (April 1934): "One might also note the almost uninterrupted decadence of writers' attention for centuries after Dante, until the gradual struggle back toward it in Crabbe,

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[64] Steele has nothing to say about Flaubert, but the second chapter of *Missing Measures* is devoted to prose and modern poetry.

Stendhal, Browning and Flaubert" (*LE* 210). There were various substantial reasons for Pound's neglecting to mention here the great writers of the English Renaissance, especially Shakespeare, Jonson, and Donne. Theirs was, as has been noted, an "age of painted speech." This complaint appears to be directed not only at Petrarchans but at practitioners of plain styles, and one surmises that not only form (metre and stanzaic forms) and the concomitant deviations from natural word order were at the root of the complaint, but also the *formality*, or attention to decorum or propriety, of Renaissance poetry. Furthermore, theirs was a Christian age and one in which abstractions in poetry were rife. Pound, though, advocated going in fear of abstractions (*LE* 5) and seemed never to tire of railing against Christianity or, for that matter, monotheism of any sort, and in one of his less virulent attacks asserts "the belief that most of the tyrannies of modern life, or at least a lot of stupidities, are based on Xtn taboos, and can't really be got rid of radically until Xtianity is taken lightly and sceptically, until, that is, it drifts back into the realm of fairy-lore and picturesque superstition" (*SL* 141). His hatred of Christianity and monotheism can be seen as deriving, on the one hand, from a liberal, secular attitude toward modern life; on the other, from an irreligious[65] skepticism about abstractions that leads to, and perhaps originates in, a kind of civilised modern primitivism. Good writing, then, would be realistic, and good verse would have the virtues of good prose.

In a review of *Prufrock and Other Observations* published in *Poetry* (1917), Pound claimed that "all good art is realism of one sort or another" (*LE* 420). To be rejected by the poet writing in the second decade of the twentieth century was rhetoric—writing of *Prufrock*, Pound rejoiced: "above all, there is no rhetoric" (*LE* 419)—or what he referred to in an approving review (*Poetry*, December 1914) of Frost's *North of Boston* as "stilted pseudo-literary language, with all sorts of floridities and worn-out ornaments" (*LE* 384). In "The Prose Tradition in Verse" (*Poetry* 1914), Pound praised Ford Madox Hueffer's "On Heaven" as "the best poem yet written in the 'twentieth-century fashion'." It is significant that the poem depicts as secular a conception of heaven, set in the south of France, as is imaginable. "I find him significant and revolutionary," Pound said, "because of his insistence upon clarity and precision, upon the prose tradition; in brief, upon efficient writing—even in verse" (*LE* 373, 377). It is difficult to see "On Heaven" as an example of efficient writing, but it has a conversational ease and slips from rhymed verse into "prose" and back again in a way that anticipates the practices of Pound and Eliot. What "On Heaven" represented was a break from this sort of thing:

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[65] Pound's talk about "the gods" is, of course, not a matter of religion but metaphor. His "irreligion" is more or less stated in "Dr Williams' Position," *LE* 394.

> Lord God of heaven that with mercy dight
> Th' alternate prayer wheel of the night and light
> Eternal hath to thee, and in whose sight
> Our days as rain drops in the sea surge fall,
>
> As bright white drops upon a leaden sea
> Grant so my songs to this grey folk may be:
>
> As drops that dream and gleam and falling catch the sun,
> Evan'scent mirrors every opal one
> Of such his splendor as their compass is,
> So, bold My Songs, seek ye such death as this.

or this sort of thing:

> Tarnished we! Tarnished! Wastrels all!
> And yet the art goes on, goes on.
> Broken our strength, yea as crushed reeds we fall,
> And yet the art, the *art* goes on.
>
> Bearers of beauty flame and wane,
> The sunset shadow and the rose's bloom.
> The sapphire seas grow dull to shine again
> As new day glistens in the old day's room.
>
> Broken our manhood for the wrack and strain;
> Drink of our hearts the sunset and the cry

"Io Triumphe!" Tho our lips be slain
We see Art vivant, and exult to die.

or even this:

In April when I see all through
Mead and garden new flowers blow
And streams with ice-bands broken flow,
Eke hear the birds their singing do;
When spring's grass-perfume floateth by
Then 'tis sweet song and birdlet's cry
Do make my old joy come anew.

The first quotation is entitled "Grace Before Song," the second "The Decadence"; both come from Pound's first book, *A Lume Spento*, published in 1908 (*CEP* 7, 44). The third is the opening stanza of "From Syria" and comes from Pound's *Personae* (1909); its archaic diction and syntactic twists are in part due to the poem's being a translation from the Provençal of the mediaeval crusader Peire Bremon (*CEP* 92-3). But Pound would later come to criticise all such archaisms and metrical shortcuts in translations.[66] In "A Retrospect" (1918), Pound complains of the "*fioritura*" (floweriness) and "ornament" in Elizabethan poetry. "'Poetry' was considered to be (as it still is considered by a great number of drivelling imbeciles) synonymous with 'lofty and flowery language'" (*LE* 29). Again, his vehemence is no doubt due in part to his having suffered as a young man from the disease that he came to diagnose. For the above passages have as false a sense of the "poetic" as can easily be found in late nineteenth-century poetry.

Unlike Robinson, who had a very good sense of what was false about late nineteenth-century poetry from the outset, Pound had to modernize himself after having published several books of poetry and numerous essays and reviews. Probably the clearest explanation of what it meant to be modern is to be found in "The Serious Artist" (*The Egoist* 1913), which is most interesting in its discussion of "'Good writing'" and "the difference between poetry and prose" (*LE* 49). "The touchstone of an art," Pound says, "is its precision"; "'Good writing' is perfect control." He then summarises: "Roughly then, Good writing is writing that is perfectly controlled, the writer says just what he means. He says it with complete clarity and simplicity. He uses the smallest possible number of words" (*LE* 48, 49, 50). The difference between poetry and prose, moreover, is not that poetry is metrical or composed in a language different from prose—indeed, "poets should acquire the graces of prose"—but that poetry has an especial concern for emotion. "Prose," on the other hand, "does not need emotion. It may, but it need not, attempt to portray emotion" (*LE* 51-2). Pound goes on to extol several passages of verse as having "in them that passionate simplicity which is beyond the precisions of the intellect," and adds:

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[66] See especially his very sound advice in, by the way, very sane and civilised letters to Laurence Binyon during Binyon's translation of the *Purgatorio* in 1938 (*SL* 308-18). The advice basically makes for a plain translation of Dante.

> The prose author has shown the triumph of his intellect and one knows that such a triumph is not without its sufferings by the way, but by the verses one is brought upon the passionate moment. This moment has brought with it nothing that violates the prose simplicities. The intellect has not found it but the intellect has been moved.
>
> There is little but folly in seeking the lines of division, yet if the two arts must be divided we may as well use that line as any other. In the verse [quoted} something has come upon the intelligence. In the prose [quoted] the intelligence has found a subject for its observations. The poetic fact pre-exists.
>
> In a different way, of course, the subject of the prose pre-exists. Perhaps the difference is undemonstrable, perhaps it is not even communicable to any save those of good will. Yet I think this orderliness in the greatest poetic passages, this quiet statement that partakes of the nature of prose and yet is floated and tossed in the emotional surges, is perhaps as true a test as that mentioned by the Greek theorician. (*LE* 53-4)

In the next section of his essay, Pound speaks of good poetry as "'maximum efficiency of expression'; I mean that the writer has expressed something interesting in such a way that one cannot re-say it more effectively. I also mean something associated with discovery. The artist must have discovered something—either of life itself or of the means of expression." Good art, he says, "must bear true witness" (*LE* 52).

Another way of putting what Pound is talking about is to say that poetry is more concentrated than prose, or at least potentially. Pound himself often spoke of poetry as having "intensity,"[67] and in "The Serious Artist" distinguishes it from prose in that it is "more highly energized" (*LE* 49). But, however one describes the difference, it is odd that Pound does not address the issue of measure, other than to mention "the Greek theorician," by which of course he means Aristotle. For the intensity, or concentration, characteristic of great poems derives not just from meaningful language, but from measured, or metrical, language. It is just conceivable that, had Pound in the early 1910s held the high opinion of Thomas Hardy's poetry that he had in the early 1930s, the history of modern poetry might have been different (see note 63). Pound appears either to have not read much by Robinson, not read him until relatively late, or simply not liked what he read. His one reference to him in the *Selected Letters* regards "Miniver Cheevy" and comes in 1915 (58); the only reference in the *Literary Essays* comes in 1934 ("Date Line") and dismisses him from having contributed to the new "awakening" in American poetry: "Robinson is still old style" (80). Robert Bridges and T. Sturge Moore, both of whom knew Pound during his early years in London, would probably have been similarly dismissed. W. B. Yeats, of course, was the established poet with the best opportunity of influencing the young Pound, his sometime secretary. But whatever influence might be found here would be minimal. None of these older poets can be said to have been an influence of any significance on Pound's poetry and poetic theories. Among the reasons for this are the young Pound's commitment to principles that would establish free verse as the way in which to write poetry in the twentieth century, and his growing conviction that abstraction was to be avoided in poetry and a concrete presentation of particulars sought instead. Whitman would have presented much more congenial company than any of these other poets, among whom Robinson, because of his strict use of metre, coupled with his Americanness and his celebrated claim to modernity, stands out as an obvious foil to Pound's poetic program. At the heart or vortex of that program was the intention to be plain, but the plainness would involve a break with traditional techniques. The "passionate simplicity," or plainness, that Pound admired in great (traditional) poetry, and which we have seen in the work of Robinson, was out of his reach because of his commitment to free verse and his skepticism regarding abstraction. To be modern meant a Whitmanian commitment to a new way, despite the success of the old. That Pound was unable to see that form was essential to the kind of intensity and control he clearly admired, and that abstraction was at least not inimical to it, is one of the most unfortunate facts of his career.

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[67] In 1914, for instance, his aim was to keep Imagism "associated with a certain clarity and intensity" (*SL* 39). This was to distinguish Pound's Imagism from what he called "Amygism," or the watering-down of the technique by followers of Amy Lowell.

Of abstraction, more will be said in the next section of this discussion. For now, there is one more point to be made about how Pound viewed metre: whatever might be said in defense of Pound as a craftsman and as a critic with a sensitive ear, he was incapable of sustaining a metrical norm, while at the same time writing in the language of natural speech, in anything but brief passages, and was surprisingly inept in his handling of the heroic couplet. "Grace Before Song," quoted above (page 234) is an example of his early couplet practice. The 241-line "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel," reprinted in the

Collected Shorter Poems (1952), first published in 1917 but written in 1915, is probably his longest poem in couplets. It is to his credit that he tried to use the heroic couplet at all during the hay days of free verse. But it is significant that the form is employed for satirical ends. The closed form as mastered by Pope is in the background. The first couplet, despite the first two words, is effective enough, but things soon start to break down:

> 'Tis of my country that I would endite
> In hope to set some misconceptions right.
> My country? I love it well, and those good fellows
> Who, since their wit's unknown, escape the gallows.
> But you stuffed coats who're neither tepid nor distinctly
> boreal,
> Pimping, conceited, placid, editorial,
> Could I but speak as 'twere in the 'Restoration'
> I would articulate your perdamnation. (*CSP* 255)

"Perdamnation" appears to be a coinage (*damnation* plus *perdition*?), and is all right except for the fact that the necessity for the coinage ironically, for Pound, arose from an attention to metre rather than to meaning. Again, though the rhyme of "editorial" with "boreal" is nicely comic, there is not much point to using the word *boreal* other than for the purpose of the rhyme. And there are other obvious faults. These lines are not the best in the poem, but nor are they by any means the worst. Some of the best—in terms of the handling of the form, not argument—stretch out of the pentameter:

> The constitution of our land, O Socrates,
> Was made to incubate such mediocrities,
> These and a state in books that's grown perennial
> And antedates the Philadelphia centennial. (*CSP* 256)

The kind of wit that Wordsworth disparaged Pope for is in evidence insofar as the form, stretched though it is, tends to take precedence over a strict attention to meaning. One can't, for instance, easily think of any reason why Ezra Pound would invoke Socrates' name other than to satisfy the demand of rhyme. But sometimes the rhymes are not so fortuitous:

> From these he learnt. Poe, Whitman, Whistler, men, their
> recognition
> Was got abroad, what better luck do you wish 'em,
> When writing well has not yet been forgiven
> In Boston, to Henry James, the greatest whom we've seen
> living.
> And timorous love of the innocuous
> Brought from Gt. Britain and dumped down a'top of us,
> Till you may take your choice: to feel the edge of satire or
> Read Bennett or some other flaccid flatterer.
> Despite it all, despite your Red Bloods, [*sic*] febrile
> concupiscence
> Whose blubbering yowls you take for passion's essence;
> Despite it all, your compound predilection
> For ignorance. its growth and its protection
> (Vide the tariff), I will hang simple facts
> Upon a tale, to combat other tracts. . . . (*CSP* 257-58)

Pound would go on to reiterate the "simple facts," essentially economic ones, in his prose and poetry throughout the remainder of his career, and whether or not he himself ever mistook "blubbering yowls" for "passion's essence," his handling of the couplet in "L'Homme Moyen Sensuel" is persuasive evidence that the attractions of free verse grew not only out of the conviction that meaning and the rhythms of the natural speaking voice could best be presented in metreless "verse," but from a self-conscious inability to write well and naturally, in a plain way, for anything more than a few lines, in what is perhaps the most demanding but also the most flexible of traditional forms, the heroic couplet.

There is abundant evidence in Pound's essays and letters that the concern for the principle of plainness that he demonstrates in "The Serious Artist" was one that developed during his modernization and remained central to his artistic convictions throughout the remainder of his career. Imagism, of course, is another central principle. In a letter of July 1916 he claims that "[t]he whole art [of poetry] is divided into:

> a. concision, or style, or saying what you mean in the fewest and clearest words.
> b. the actual necessity for creating or constructing something; of

> presenting an image, or enough images of concrete things arranged to stir the reader.

Beyond these concrete objects named," he adds, "one can make simple emotional statements of fact, such as 'I am tired,' or simple credos like 'After death there comes no other calamity'" (*SL* 90). In a letter the following May he is less clear, but the proposal is the same:

> Damn it all I want the author talking to the one most intelligent person he knows, and NOT accepting any current form, form of story, form of anything. Hang it all, how the hell does one say what I'm trying to get at.
>
> I want it all "untanned alligator skin," and NO "make love's" and "dear angel's." (*SL* 113)

The proposal was, as each of these quotations shows, in support of imagism in poetry. But what in part motivated the imagistic theory and was in fact a fundamental part of the proposal itself (which the next section of this discussion will attempt to prove) was plainness, as the emphasis on brevity and clarity (principles everywhere present in Pound's theorising) in the first quotation and the emphasis on intelligent talk in the second indicate. That the *Cantos* should, by virtue of their unintentional obscurity,[68] obscure plainness as an important poetic principle is a manifestation of Pound's personal tragedy. Indeed, as the passage from the letters containing the "complementi" to Eliot on having written *The Waste Land* shows (page 231 above), Pound was, at least as early as 1921, aware of his failure, and, in fact, his inability, to achieve the poetic goals he set for himself. It is one of the most candid moments in the letters. In a sense, he never recovered from the debilitating effects of his early aestheticism, which also tended to obscure, even from

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[68] Pound admitted the obscurity in a letter of 1927 to his father, Homer L. Pound: "Afraid the whole damn poem is rather obscure, especially in fragments" (*SL* 210). But in a letter of 1938 he insisted that "[t]here is *no intentional* obscurity. There is condensation to maximum attainable. It is impossible to make the deep as quickly comprehensible as the shallow" (*SL* 322-23).

Pound himself, plainness as a fundamental principle. This is as much as to say that there was something about Pound the man that made for this unfortunate situation, and his celebrated "mimetic" talent, a talent for assuming styles and "voices" or "masks" or "personae," coupled with his astonishing American energy and optimism[69] and his headstrong American certainty or surface confidence (qualities of character he shared with Whitman) probably had a great deal to do with the nervous, unfocussed attention that made the situation possible.

For not only was plainness a principle central to Pound's modernization, and, as we shall see, to his imagistic theories, it was also a part of his heritage. Pound recognised this when he spoke of Whitman as his "spiritual father." It was not, however, simply a literary matter; it was an inheritance—call it simplicity of character, a propensity for plain talk,[70] a love of candour, sincerity, honesty, or what you will—that they shared and that is identifiable as an American quality, though it is of course no more unique to America than it is to be found as a distinguishing feature in all Americans. It may be called, however, a native American plainness. As has often been noted, the real Ezra Pound is hard to identify in the poetry, but he probably resembles the man depicted in the "complementi" letter, and, despite the camouflage, in this passage from a letter by D. H. Lawrence:

> . . . [A]nd there stood a young, callow, swashbuckling Ezra, with an ear-ring in one ear, very affected and silly. Then came his parents to London to see him, after Ezra had the London drawing-rooms bewitched by his mannerisms and affectations; and they

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[69] See George P. Elliott's interesting discussion of Pound's character in "Poet of Many Voices," reprinted in *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology*, 251-77.

[70] In *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951), Hugh Kenner speaks of "'plain talk'" as a vital component of Canto LIX (187). In 1912, Pound himself praised the poetry of H. D. in similar terms: "This is the sort of American stuff I can show here and in Paris without its being ridiculed. Objective—no slither; direct—no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight as the Greek!" (*SL* 11).

> were good plain middle-western folks—and Ezra died away, and there were pa and ma, good and plain and middle-western, and poor Ezra not knowing what to do about them. (*EP* 270)

iii

Imagism, Vorticism, and the Ideogram:

A Primitive Plainness

> For the organ of tradition, it is either speech or writing: for Aristotle saith well, 'Words are the images of cogitations, and letters are the images of words.' But yet it is not of necessity that cogitations be expressed by the medium of words. . . . And therefore we see in the commerce of barbarous people, that understand not one another's language, and in the practice of divers that are dumb and deaf, that men's minds are expressed in gestures, though not exactly, yet to serve the turn. And we understand further, that it is the use of China, and the kingdoms of the High Levant, to write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions . . . .
>
> —Sir Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), II, 16 (131)

The primitivism of Ezra Pound would be a very simple thing (poetically, if not psychologically) if it amounted to no more than an acceptance of the "yawp" based on the appeal of the wilderness to the civilised human being. But it is more than that. Primitivism is also related to Pound's understanding of language, which was nominalistic, and which combined with the Romantic doctrine of the artist as creator to result in his advocating the presentation of intense moments in imagistic free verse. "Language," Pound wrote to Harriet Monroe in 1915, "is made out of concrete things. General expressions in non-concrete terms are a laziness; they are talk, not art, not creation. They are the reaction of things on the writer, not a creative act *by* the writer" (*SL* 49). If it is a long and obscure road from Sir Francis Bacon's observations on language to the theorising of Pound, it is perhaps well to remember that the road from

Bacon to John Locke is a fairly straight and narrow one, as is that from Locke to Jonathan Edwards, and from Edwards to Emerson. It is not the purpose of this study, however, to trace an influence of any of these writers on Pound, but, rather, to suggest both that Pound owed his basic understanding of the workings of Western languages to the theories of Locke, which were to some extent anticipated by Bacon and others, and that his theory of the Chinese ideogram, which he derived from Ernest Fenollosa, seemed to him a solution to the problem of direct, truthful, or real communication posed by Locke's theory. Indeed, the ideogram appeared to present him with an almost magical means by which objective experience might be directly communicated to the reader. The ideogram, coupled with the principles of brevity and clarity that Pound had become devoted to, would make for a plainness never known in English poetry before.

Pound's theories of imagism, vorticism, and the ideogram might also be said to owe something to Bacon insofar as Bacon is the father of modern science, and Pound's theories lay claim to "scientific" procedures. "The serious artist," he says in the essay with that title, "is scientific in that he presents the image of his desire, of his hate, of his indifference as precisely that, as precisely the image of his own desire, hate or indifference. The more precise his record the more lasting and unassailable his work of art" (*LE* 46). Scientists, however, are not concerned with expressing their emotions in their work; this, therefore, was the special realm of the artist. The artist was not to be outdone, and it is for this reason that Pound reiterated his claim to a scientific approach, and that both he and Eliot would draw analogies between artistic processes and scientific experiments.[71] Thus, like the scientist, the poet is a discoverer, one who makes advances, as Pound makes clear in, among other places, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," first published as part of "Imagisme" (co-authored by F. S. Flint) in *Poetry*, 1913:

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[71] Probably the most famous such analogy by Eliot is between the effect of experience on the poet and the effect on "a bit of finely filiated platinum [when it] is introduced into a

> Consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap.
>
> The scientist does not expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until he has *discovered* something. He begins by learning what has been discovered already. He goes from that point onward. (*EP* 43)

In this way, the poet can "make it new." One can see how this view of the poet as discoverer, or experimenter, could lead to free verse. But unlike the scientist, who does not—indeed, cannot—discard real discoveries by previous scientists, the experimental poet has in practice tended to discard real discoveries, especially with regard to form, by previous poets. Whereas the experimental scientist builds upon previous discoveries and does so in compliance with the facts of those discoveries, there is nothing to prevent the experimental poet from ignoring Pound's advice about "learning what has been discovered already." Furthermore, it is difficult to tell what Pound means by going "from that point onward." Does the experimentalist build upon previous discoveries, or learn about them in the interest of ensuring the novelty of his own method? In any case, Pound's analogy falls apart when it comes to form. For only the mad scientist would venture, in the name of discovery, to abandon the *form* of scientific experimentation, to abandon moving from hypothesis, through empirical observation of data, to the arrival at a conclusion in which the discovery or rediscovery of facts is made. Yet

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chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide." Sulphurous acid is produced during the experiment, but "the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum." And, presumably, the acid is the poem. See "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (53-54). Also, in "Hamlet and His Problems," Eliot speaks of "an 'objective correlative' . . . which shall be the formula" for particular emotions. See *The Sacred Wood*, 100.

Pound advocated the abandonment of form in poetry, or at least traditional or "symmetrical" form.

His reason for doing so was as old as Romantic theory, specifically, Coleridge's theory of "organic form." Here is one of Pound's versions of the theory, from "Credo" (1912):

> *Form.*—I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase. That most symmetrical forms have certain uses. That a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetrical forms. (*LE* 9)

It is not clear why a "'fluid'" content should parallel the form of a tree, while a "'solid'" content should parallel the form of "water poured into a vase," though the rhetorical strategy of suggesting the constriction of the vase upon a "'fluid'" content is clear enough. It is also clear that the "freedom" of free verse is believed necessary for the precise and proper rendering of one's meaning (which, as we have seen, has more to do with feeling than thought, the realm of prose). That is, for "a vast number of subjects," form, or symmetrical form, is a hindrance, not a means of discovery. As Pound stipulates in "Vorticism" (*Fortnightly Review*, 1914) and elsewhere, this freedom is also essential for the attainment of the precise and proper rhythm that, as he sees it, belongs to each emotion:

> I said in the preface to my *Guido Cavalcanti* that I believed in an absolute rhythm. I believe that every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it.
>
> (This belief leads to *vers libre* and to experiments in quantitative verse.) (*EP* 49)

Obviously, the attempt to make one's paraphrasable and "emotional" content fit a pre-existent form could only result, given Pound's "beliefs," in either an imprecise, or incomplete, rendering of that content, or a padded or wordy or ornamental contortion of it—at least, for "a vast number of subjects," which is really no more than a way of admitting that the poets of the past found a certain number of subjects suitable to "symmetrical forms." Free verse can thus be seen not only as providing greater freedom to the poet, but as a means of greater precision, or as a means to truth, which involves a prejudice for brevity, clarity, and sincerity. Couple this with a desire for natural speech and a distrust of rhetoric, and the appeal of free verse would be very strong, especially to the young poet inclined toward novelty. In addition, free verse would appear to be a vehicle for a plainer poetry.

Pound's argument for free verse is based on the fallacy of imitative form. Insofar as it is a rewording of Coleridge's "organic form" (which he opposes to "mechanical" form), it also has built into it what might be termed the natural fallacy, or the fallacy of vitality. By implication, poems in traditional, or "symmetrical" or "mechanical," forms are inert, static, dead; whereas "organic" or "'fluid'" forms are active, dynamic, vital. But what poet would want to write dead poems? Who wouldn't want to instil his poetry with life? The rhetoric of this Romantic theory has an obvious appeal but is revealed for what it is—only rhetoric—when we stop to ask ourselves whether, say, Hamlet's blank verse soliloquies or Hardy's or Robinson's best verse does not live. Moreover, the theory is nominalistic, but the rhetoric tends to mask this, and the nominalism can best be seen in Pound's expression of the theory. For it is crucial to recognise that Pound's tree is a particular tree, while his vase is a general, or universal, vase.[72] That is, Pound does not or will not acknowledge the treeness of the tree, that particular species of trees have repeatable, universal qualities, and that all trees have yet more general universal qualities—roots, trunk, branches, leaves, an upward tendency, and so forth. In contrast, the vaseness of the vase—a receptacle that *contains* the poet's (personal) expression—is implicitly acknowledged, and, despite Pound's celebrated love of various poetic traditions, the acknowledgement slights traditional form. This aspect of Pound's thought places him firmly in the Romantic tradition. For it is based on the notion that nature serves as a model for one's art,[73] which, as we shall see, was also at the heart of Pound's attraction to the ideogram. But whereas for Wordsworth and Coleridge nature could still be seen as a manifestation of the divine plan, for the modern poet who has heard that God is dead, that knowledge and truth are verifiable by empiric or analytic means and are the domain of the scientist and the philosopher anyway, and that language—to which the poet, more than any other, has always laid special claim—is arbitrary and universals unreal, the chaotic or orderless appearance of nature was bound to have presented a powerful appeal. Furthermore, his acceptance (whether fully conscious or not) of nominalism and of a materialistic universe, and therefore of an essential meaninglessness to existence, would send him running toward that which he might assert was real, toward objective, verifiable phenomena that he could present in his art.

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[72] Pound's vase may thus be identified with Wallace Stevens' jar in "Anecdote of the Jar" (*CP* 76).

Some such explanation to a large extent accounts for the advent of Imagism in the early 1910s. F. S. Flint's name is attached to that part of the document called "Imagisme" that contains the three rules of the new movement; Pound, though he warned poets not to "consider the three rules recorded by Mr Flint . . . as dogma" (*EP* 42), stood by these rules and perhaps helped to formulate them, though T. E. Hulme has a claim to being the primary architect. They were

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[73] Cf. Henry Adams' proclamation, "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man," quoted in Winters' *In Defense of Reason* 405. See also *The Education of Henry Adams*, by Henry Adams, Modern Library Edition, 451.

> 1. Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective.
> 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation.
> 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (*EP* 41)

On numerous occasions Pound mentioned the second rule as being the most important of the three. "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," the part of the document that bears Pound's name, contains various guidelines for the poet, including the famous, "[g]o in fear of abstractions," and begins with this definition:

> An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. I use the term 'complex' rather in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application.
>
> It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art. (*EP* 41-2)

As Steele says of this definition, "[t]he mere presentation of an 'Image' is seen as being sufficient to release a flood of insight" (*MM* 265). "In a Station of the Metro" (*Lustra*, 1916)—

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough. (*SP* 35)

—is the popular paradigm of this "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." The main limitations of the poem are its lack of anything more than this complex, and an ambivalence in the presentation. Rather than a "sense of sudden liberation," we surely experience a sense of constriction, not because of the "crowd," but because of the ambivalence; if there is a "sense of sudden growth" to be gained from coming to understand this poem, we surely ought to be able to specify the nature of that growth. Instead, we are left to interpret the poem as we may, and there is nothing (excluding reference to Pound's own comments on the poem) to say that one interpretation is any better than another, even contradictory one. Since Pound would not have sanctioned Reader Response methods and believed precision to be of the utmost importance, it is likely that he would have had ultimately to admit to its failure, for all that it is an interesting poem and satisfies the definition of an "Image" as well as could be imagined. It also exhibits an admirable clarity and brevity, and though it presents an image, or a complex of two images related in a *haiku*-like fashion,[74] the image is not presented as ornament; rather, it *is* the poem:

> Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The point of *Imagisme* is that it does not use images *as ornaments*. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.
>
> ....
>
> One is tired of ornamentations, they are all a trick, and any sharp person can learn them. (*EP* 53)

"Imagisme" first appeared in March, 1913. Noel Stock, in *The Life of Ezra Pound*, tells us that in the second half of 1913 Pound met the widow of Ernest Fenollosa, the American-born scholar and translator of Japanese and Chinese literatures. Mrs. Fenollosa felt that Pound was the man to complete her husband's various translations, and so Pound became Fenollosa's literary executor. Stock believes that Mrs. Fenollosa handed "[s]ome of the material to Pound personally, other material she posted in London—this was towards the end of 1913—and in November 1915 she sent a further packet from Alabama" (148). It is not clear from Stock's account exactly when Pound received Fenollosa's important essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for

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[74] See Steele's criticism of modernist pretensions to the *haiku*, *Missing Measures* 265.

Poetry," but given the difference between "Imagisme" and "Vorticism," which was published in the *Fortnightly Review* on September 1, 1914, it is highly likely that it was amongst the papers he received in 1913. The chief difference between the two theoretical essays is that in the latter "Vorticism has been announced as including such and such painting and sculpture and 'Imagisme' in verse," and that Vorticism provides the Image with a definite sense of action: "The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing." The sense of action would thus, it was hoped, put distance between Imagism and Impressionism: "The organization of forms is a much more energetic and creative action than the copying or imitating of light on a haystack" (*EP* 57).

Pound's claim that "[t]he image is not an idea" but "a radiant node or cluster" is an attempt to get beyond the abstract nature of language, as is his division of poetry into the lyrical and the imagistic:

> There is a sort of poetry where music, sheer melody, seems as if it were just bursting into speech.
>
> There is another sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were 'just coming over into speech'.

Once again, the meaning of a poem, the paraphrasable content, would appear not to matter, nor would truth. But Pound wants his image (and his "music") to bear the meaning, to convey the truth:

> Dante is a great poet by reason of this [imagistic] faculty, and Milton is a windbag because of his lack of it. The 'image' is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being. . . . Even Aristotle distinguishes between rhetoric, 'which is persuasion', and the analytical examination of truth. As a 'critical' movement [as distinguished from a "stylistic movement" (47)], the 'Imagisme' of 1912 to 1914 set out 'to bring poetry up to the level of prose'. (*EP* 48)

Pound goes on to elaborate, unconvincingly, on the connection between imagistic poetry and painting:

> The Image is the poet's pigment. The painter should use his colour because he sees or feels it. I don't much care whether he is representative or non-representative. He should *depend*, of course, on the creative, not upon the mimetic or representational part of his work. It is the same in writing poems, the author must use his *image* because he sees or feels it, *not* because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics. (*EP* 51)

This account could not be much further removed from the traditional, and classical, one offered by Ben Jonson in *Discoveries*:

> Poetry and picture are arts of a like nature, and both are busy about imitation. It was excellently said of Plutarch, poetry was a speaking picture, and picture a mute poesy. For they both invent, feign, and devise many things, and accommodate all they invent to the use and service of nature. Yet of the two, the pen is more noble than the pencil; for that can speak to the understanding, the other, but to the sense. (561)

Jonson recognises that poetry can be thought of as "a speaking picture," but the "image"—of a man, say—that the poem depicts is one that speaks "to the understanding," not "to the sense." In the post-Symbolist method special care is given to speak to both, and Pound's inclusion of the intellect in his definition of the Image ("that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time") is an attempt to do the same thing. But in other accounts that he offers of the image, as well as in most imagistic poetry, the presence of the intellect and the role of the understanding are dubious: at its best, a poetry made strictly of images speaks clearly to the sense but indistinctly to the understanding.

The image, then, was understood by Pound to be an anti-rhetorical device; it would make reality plain and immediately accessible: "An *image*, in our sense, is real because we know it directly" (*EP* 51). This sense of reality was not to be confined to the presentation of faces in a crowd or to red wheelbarrows, for it included that which the mind, or imagination, might conceive, as well as that which it perceived. Hence, Pound was able to proclaim that

> Dante's *Paradiso* is the most wonderful *image*. By that I do not mean that it is a perseveringly imagistic performance. The permanent part is Imagisme, the rest, the discourses with the calendar of saints and the discussions about the nature of the moon, are philology. The form of sphere above sphere, the varying reaches of light, the minutiae of pearls upon foreheads, all these are parts of the Image. The Image is the poet's pigment . . . . (*EP* 51)

But the mind, it may be objected, is capable of so much more; this theory of Imagism fails to acknowledge the abstracting power of the mind and the abstract, or conceptual, nature of language.

Pound appears to have believed that he had met this objection. For he says that "[t]here are two opposed ways of thinking of a man": first, "as that toward which perception moves, as the toy of circumstance, as the plastic substance *receiving* impressions;" and second, "as directing a certain fluid force against circumstance, as *conceiving* instead of merely reflecting and observing" (*EP* 54). This is very similar to the associational psychology advanced by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), but it may have been derived from Bacon. Locke stipulates that all our ideas, which he defines as including "*whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking*" (Introd. §8)—thus, percepts, concepts, memories, and imaginations—come from either of two sources. The first source he calls Sensation, the second Reflection, and both of these are based on experience, which involves the observation of either "external sensible objects," or "the internal operations of our minds" (II. i. 2). Furthermore, Reflection is secondary in time, though implicitly primary in importance, for only by means of Reflection can complex ideas be formed and understood. Pound's brief account opposes "*receiving* impressions" to "*conceiving*," and while the latter involves a constructive or creative activity of mind, the former involves mere "reflecting and observing," terms that are un-Lockian in their application in that Locke uses "reflecting" to refer to the activity of the mind when busy with "its own operations within itself" (II. i. 4), and uses "observing" as a general term referring to the phenomenon of experiencing both Sensation and Reflection. By "observing" Pound means experiencing sensory percepts, and by "reflecting" he no doubt means the sort of reflection Bacon refers to in *The New Organon* (1620):

> For let men please themselves as they will in admiring and almost adoring the human mind, this is certain: that as an uneven mirror distorts the rays of objects according to its own figure and section, so the mind, when it receives impressions of objects through the sense, cannot be trusted to report them truly, but in forming its notions mixes up its own nature with the nature of things. (22)

If this account of Pound's remark on the "two opposed ways of thinking of a man" is correct, then it is curious that he proposed a poetry of images, for "reflecting and observing" (terms appropriately, one should think, modified by the word "merely") must logically be regarded with some skepticism. Pound would apparently either have to allow that the poet could imprecisely present his image, or to advocate the primacy of the imagination,[75] which is not subject to inaccurate reporting of received impressions. But Pound also regarded the imagistic poet as "*conceiving*" his poems, and since the conception was not concerned with thought the object appears to have been to convey emotions by means either of possibly inaccurate received impressions, or of images formed by the imagination. Despite the "merely" attached to

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[75] In this he would be quite unlike Bacon, who writes, "God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world; rather may he graciously grant to us to write an apocalypse or true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures" (*New Org.* 29).

"reflecting and observing," Pound adds: "One does not claim that one way [*"receiving* impressions"] is better than the other [*"conceiving"*], one notes a diversity of the temperament. The two camps always exist" (*EP* 54). Perhaps this denial of a hierarchy, or of the superiority of one process ("camps" is surely not the word) over the other, has its cause in the problem that the image is meant to appeal directly to the senses but can only do so through language, which is essentially conceptual. In any case, this brief epistemological passage is not clearly related by Pound to Imagism or Vorticism; it is as much a fragment as any random passage from the *Cantos*. Pound is presumably trying to justify in philosophical terms the creation of images in poetry, but one leaves the passage unenlightened.

Perhaps the most interesting passage in "Vorticism" is the discussion of mathematics (*EP* 55-56), which reveals Pound's paradoxical attraction to abstraction and universals. He describes Vorticism as "an intensive art," relates intensity of expression to dynamism, and then turns to mathematics to illustrate Vorticism's intensity. He offers examples of arithmetical, algebraic, and geometrical equations. The arithmetical equation amounts to "mere conversation or 'ordinary common sense'"; the algebraic to "separate facts," or "the language of philosophy. IT MAKES NO PICTURE." The geometrical equation he finds more interesting, for

> when one studies Euclid one finds that the relation $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ applies to the ratio between the squares on the two sides of a right-angled triangle and the square on the hypotenuse. One still writes it $a2 + b2 = c2$, but one has begun to talk about form. Another property or quality of life has crept into one's matter. Until then one had dealt only with numbers. But even this statement does not *create* form.

The emphasis is on creation rather than form. The heroic couplet, presumably, would not appeal to Pound because it is a pre-existent form. Free verse, however, would appeal because each free-verse poem brings a unique "form" into being. The beauty of analytic geometry is that with it "one is able *actually to create*":

> Thus, we learn that the equation $(x-a)^2 + (y-b)^2 = r^2$ governs the circle. It is the circle. It is not a particular circle, it is any circle and all circles. It is nothing that is not a circle. It is the circle free of space and time limits. It is the universal, existing in perfection, in freedom from space and time. Mathematics is dull as ditchwater until one reaches analytics. But in analytics we come upon a new way of dealing with form.

Pound appears willing to accept abstraction of a mathematical nature and is keenly interested in analytical geometry because it "creates" forms.[76] But one wonders if he would have called this abstract. He appears to think of the circle as a concrete form, but the idea of a circle is abstract, though the universe is full of circular particulars. Also, the equation for the circle doesn't create the circle; it discovers or describes it. Like the heroic couplet, the circle is a pre-existent form. Again, the equation for the circle attracts Pound's attention, it would seem, because he regards the circle as concrete. Pound continues:

> It is in this way that art handles life. The difference between art and analytical geometry is the difference of subject-matter only. Art is more interesting in proportion as life and the human consciousness are more complex and more interesting than forms and numbers.

Pound probably means *great* art here. As Jonson says of Shakespeare in "To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr William Shakespeare, And What He

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[76] Pound's understanding of "forms" originates with Bacon, who claims to have

> noted and corrected as an error of the human mind the opinion that forms give existence. For though in nature nothing really exists besides individual bodies, performing pure individual acts according to a fixed law, yet in philosophy this very law, and the investigation, discovery, and explanation of it, is the foundation as well of knowledge as of operation. And it is this law with its clauses that I mean when I speak of *forms* . . . . (*New Org*. II. ii., 122)

Bacon thus stands opposed to the Platonic conception of forms, and in asserting that "in nature nothing really exists besides individual bodies" reveals the pluralism and nominalism of his philosophy. Pound differs from Bacon when he speaks of the "creation" rather than the discovery of forms.

Hath Left Us," "He was not of an age, but for all time!" (line 43, 454); great art is like the equation for the circle in that it achieves universality, if not freedom from "space and time limits." Pound continues:

> The statements of 'analytics' are 'lords' over fact. They are the thrones and dominations that rule over form and recurrence. And in like manner are great works of art lords over fact, over race-long recurrent moods, and over tomorrow.
>
> Great works of art contain this fourth sort of equation. They cause form to come into being. By the 'image' I mean such an equation; not an equation of mathematics, not something about *a*, *b*, *c*, having something to do with form, but about *sea*, *cliffs*, *night*, having something to do with mood.

At this point Pound's conception of the universality of art crumbles. He anticipates here Eliot's "'objective correlative'": the image "shall be the formula" for a particular "mood."[77] The motive for his understanding of both the relationship between the circle and the mathematical equation for the circle and that between the image and the universality of great art is the fear of abstraction; like Locke, he "has everywhere a sober dread of abstractions, and clings to the particular and concrete, with a sense of the risk of losing the real in the emptiness of the universal."[78]

"There is," as Graham Hough observes in *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (1960), "in all Pound's practice and theory at this time a positivism, a defiant insistence on the surface of things, and an insistence that the surface of things is all" (12). The "insistence on the surface of things" is evident in Pound's scornful attitude toward monotheism and in his materialistic bent in general: a poetry of images, however suggestive those images may be, is a poetry concerned with concrete reality, with things. And, indeed, there is an affinity between his skepticism and logical positivism insofar as Pound, like the positivist, regards empirical observation and the verifiability of statements as essential, and the forming of analytic statements as a reassuring method of verification. In any case, positivism would in all likelihood have appealed to Pound, and materialism, which was a part of the scientific and industrial age that he was born into, by and large typifies his various theoretical exploits. But there is something desperate about those exploits, something dreadful about them. There may be two causes. First, the poet (and anyone else who cares to think) is to "go in fear of abstractions," and this entails not only the fear advised but a dread of failing to capture (or "create") the real in one's poems. But, the poet is likely to ask, consciously or unconsciously, will the presentation (or "creation") of images in language be enough, will it reach out to others, will it satisfy me in my quest for reality? The second possible cause is related to the first. Because, like many of his time, Pound had conceded "thought" to prose, and because materialism and a skeptical view of the power of language had further reduced the subject matter of poetry[79] in that all speculative, metaphysical, or religious implications, and, indeed, all explications (or commentary) of any sort, were deemed no longer permissible, and had urged an imagistic poetics upon the poet, Pound found himself in the position of having to use words to make images of things real and at the same time attend to human emotion. That is, unlike the post-Symbolist method, in which the image carries a burden of meaning (both thought and feeling) because of the co-presence of commentary or abstract language, Pound's image would miraculously convey emotion, or have "something to do with mood," while dispensing with commentary or abstraction—which is to say, thought. The impossibility of this task, apparent in the vagueness of Pound's desperate "equation" between "*sea, cliffs, night*" and "mood," would exert enormous pressure on the dedicated poet in, to use Whitman's words, his "sanest hours."

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[77] Might this be the reason for Eliot's strange omission of "Vorticism" from the *Literary Essays* ?

[78] This quotation comes from Alexander Campbell Fraser, the editor of the 1894 Oxford edition of the *Essay*, in a note at the beginning of Chapter VIII of Book II (vol. II, 101).

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[79] It is a fallacy of the modern period that it represented an opening up of both poetic methods, or techniques, and subject matter.

A poetry of images is a poetry concerned with things. Pound has taken up and gone beyond Wordsworth's first requisite in his "Preface to the Edition of 1815":

> The powers requisite for the production of poetry are: first, those of Observation and Description—*i.e.* the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer; whether the things depicted be actually present to the senses, or have a place only in the memory. (*Prose Works* III. 26)

Pound came explicitly to condemn description ("A Few Don'ts," *LE* 6), but of course laid a great deal of emphasis on observation, and he and Eliot both advised an imagistic poetics that was "impersonal," or "unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer." This latter quality, which Eliot especially promoted as attaining to a "classical" austerity, impersonalism, or objectivity, is actually Romantic in origin. Also, Wordsworth's first requisite[80] bears a striking resemblance to the first rule of Imagism: "Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective." Pound and the Imagists may not have profited directly from Wordsworth's theories, but Wordsworth was at least recognised by Pound, in "The Rev. G. Crabbe, LL. B." (1917), as, if inferior to Crabbe,[81] an early imagist: "He was a silly old sheep with a genius, an unquestionable genius, for imagisme, for a presentation of natural detail, wild-fowl bathing in a hole in the ice, etc., and this talent, or the fruits of this talent, he buried in a desert of bleatings" (*L E* 277). The "bleatings" are all that which is not imagistic, or concerned with observation—the circumlocutory autobiography, the commentary, the speculative "philosophy," and so on.

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[80] The other requisites include sensibility ("the more exquisite . . . , the wider will be the range of the poet's perceptions"), reflection (which "makes the Poet acquainted with the value of actions, images, thoughts, and feelings; and assists the sensibility in perceiving their connection with each other"), imagination and fancy ("to modify, to create, and to associate"), invention ("by which characters are composed out of materials supplied by observation"), and judgment ("to decide how and where, and in what degree, each of these faculties ought to be exerted").

[81] "If," Pound laments, "the nineteenth century had built itself on Crabbe? Ah, if! But no; they wanted confections" (*LE* 277). It is interesting that Pound admired the plainness of Crabbe's descriptive passages but is closer in his theories to Wordsworth.

The interest in things is, however, older than Wordsworth. Sir Francis Bacon took a new slant on the Ciceronian-Senecan debate about words (stylistic embellishment) *versus* matter (meaning)[82] when he established the empirical observation of things as the central method of science, or knowledge:

> I have not sought (I say) nor do I seek either to force or ensnare men's judgments, but I lead them to things themselves and the concordances of things, that they may see for themselves what they have, what they can dispute, what they can add and contribute to the common stock. And for myself, if in anything I have been either too credulous or too little awake and attentive, or if I have fallen off by the way and left the inquiry incomplete, nevertheless I so present these things naked and open, that my errors can be marked and set aside before the mass of knowledge be further infected by them; and it will be easy also for others to continue and carry on my labors. And by these means I suppose that I have established forever a true and lawful marriage between the empirical and the rational faculty, the unkind and ill-starred divorce and separation of which has thrown into confusion all the affairs of the human family. (*The New Organon* 14)

Bacon's last sentence here offers an example of simple figurative language being used in the service of matter, and thus is a kind of model for his approach to the reporting of knowledge. The mind is to be busy with the observation of things, and one's style is subservient to one's matter; thus:

> It being part of my design to set everything forth, as far as may be, plainly and perspicuously (for nakedness of the mind is still, as nakedness of the body once was, the companion of

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[82] See Book I, chapter 4 of *The Advancement of Learning*, especially pages 25-26.

> innocence and simplicity), let me first explain the order and plan of the work. (*New Org.* 17)

Exact observation and plainness go hand in hand. But three hundred years intervene between Bacon and Pound, and by the advent of Imagism there had occurred a divorce, in poetry, in the "marriage between the empirical and the rational faculty." Bacon claimed to "perform the office of a true priest of the sense (from which all knowledge in nature must be sought, unless men mean to go mad) and a not unskillful interpreter of its oracles" (*New Org.* 22). Pound might have made a similar claim, but arguably did go mad, though not because he did not seek knowledge in nature by means of the sense, but because—at least this is part of the story—he did so without recognising the advantage of the rational faculty as an evaluative instrument. He would have agreed with Bacon that "all depends on keeping the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature and so receiving their images simply as they are" (*New Org.* 29), but failed to see that that is only the first step in a rational process, the ideal end of which is to arrive at certain knowledge.

Abstraction (for all that Bacon might occasionally downplay it[83]) is intrinsic to this process; it requires abstract thinking, for instance, to arrive at theories to explain observed phenomena, to formulate hypotheses, to categorize results of experimentation. But Pound's fear of abstraction made him partially blind to the empirical process, though he recognised a certain indebtedness to Bacon:

> [A]ll your teachers will tell you that science developed more rapidly after Bacon had suggested the direct examination of phenomena, and after Galileo and others had stopped discussing things so much, and had begun really to look at them, and to invent means (like the telescope) of seeing them better.

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[83] He speaks in *The New Organon*, for instance, "of the pernicious and inveterate habit of dwelling on abstractions," and of "mere abstraction" (II. iv. 122-23, II. xxvi. 170).

Furthermore, he was indebted to Fenollosa for bringing to his attention the means by which the poet might realise the concrete presentation of objective phenomena:

> By contrast to the method of abstraction [used by the "mediaeval theologian" and rejected by Bacon], or of defining things in more and still more general terms, Fenollosa emphasizes the method of science, 'which is the method of poetry', as distinct from that of 'philosophic discussion', and is the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing. (*ABC* 20)

The remainder of this discussion will focus on Pound's understanding of the ideogram.

Ernest Fenollosa died in 1908. That he shared some of Pound's theories of poetry places the revolutionary nature of those theories in some question, though there is no question that Pound was the great proponent of them. Fenollosa's essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" was obviously not essential to Imagism, but it supplemented and bolstered Pound's theory. Like Pound, Fenollosa had a prejudice for a "concrete" poetics and urged a Baconian rejection of abstraction:

> Of course this view of the grammarians springs from the discredited, or rather the useless, logic of the Middle Ages. According to this logic, thought deals with abstractions, concepts drawn out of things by a sifting process. These logicians never inquired how the 'qualities' which they pulled out of things came to be there. The truth of all their little checker-board juggling depended upon the natural order by which these powers or properties or qualities were folded in concrete things, yet they despised the 'thing' as a mere 'particular,' or pawn. It was as if Botany should reason from the leaf-patterns woven into our table-cloths. Valid scientific thought consists in following as closely as may be the actual and entangled lines of forces as they pulse through things. Thought deals with no bloodless concepts but watches *things move* under its microscope. (12)

As we have seen, the Imagists advocated a "[d]irect treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective." Fenollosa's essay contributed to Imagism, or Vorticism, the idea of giving the image a sense of movement, and this was based on the observation of nature. If there is an implicit primitivism in Whitman's imagism and in the theories of the Imagists proper, it was explicit in Fenollosa:

> The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself. It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation. All truth has to be expressed in sentences because all truth is the *transference of power*. The type of sentence in nature is a flash of lightning. It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth. No unit of natural process can be less than this. All natural processes are, in their units, as much as this. (12)

Thus the sentence form that mirrors nature is the transitive sentence:

> The form of the Chinese transitive sentence, and of the English (omitting particles), exactly corresponds to this universal form of action in nature. This brings language close to *things*, and in its strong reliance upon verbs it erects all speech into a kind of dramatic poetry. (12)

There is thus an "identity of structure" (22) between nature, the transitive sentence, and scientific observation. Moreover, "[p]oetry only does consciously what the primitive races did unconsciously" (23):

> In diction and in grammatical form science is utterly opposed to logic. Primitive men who created language agreed with science and not with logic. Logic has abused the language which they left to her mercy.
>
> Poetry agrees with science and not with logic.
>
> The moment we use the copula, the moment we express subjective inclusions, poetry evaporates. The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things the better the poetry. We need in poetry thousands of active words, each doing its utmost to show forth the motive and vital forces. We can not exhibit the wealth of nature by mere summation, by the piling of sentences. Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within.
>
> In Chinese character [*sic*] each word accumulated this sort of energy in itself. (28)

Parts of this passage, especially the sentence describing "poetic thought," could have been written by Pound. To a poet already committed to an imagistic and intense poetry, to a poetry devoted to creating things themselves, the Chinese character as conceived by Fenollosa must have presented exciting prospects. For the ideogram, according to what we now know to have been a mistaken theory, did not just present a noun-like picture of the "thing," but a verb-like picture of the thing-in-action. As suggested before, it is likely that Pound's discovery of this theory at least in part motivated his headlong plunge into Vorticism.

Fenollosa tells us that "Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols" (8), which, as Locke established, is not the case with phonetic languages. "Chinese poetry has the unique advantage of combining . . . the vividness of painting . . . with the mobility of sounds" (9). A poetry based on this theory would presumably not be susceptible to the extreme subjectivism and skepticism consequent to the nominalistic interpretation of Western languages. In an essay called "Wordsworth, Language, and Romanticism" in *From Locke to Saussure* (1982), Hans Aarsleff draws attention to the connection between Locke's theory of language and Romantic subjectivism. The "'double conformity'" that Locke objected to and that Aarsleff mentions in the following passage had to do with the supposition "'that the abstract *ideas* [men] have in their minds are such as agree to the things existing without them to which they are referred, and are the same also to which the names they give them do by the use and propriety of that language belong'":

> It was Locke's aim to reject this delusion of the "double conformity," for he repeated often, "words . . . stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them." Our perceptions and ideas are private, words are about ideas and not directly about things. This is the source of that "extreme subjectivism" of romantic aesthetics that Professor Abrams illustrates with a passage from Tieck's *William Lovell*: "Indeed, everything that I believe I perceive outside myself can only exist within myself" . . . . From Locke's principle—amply argued in the *Essay*—follows a host of consequences that have persisted to the present time. (375)

Imagism was one of those consequences. In aiming at a concrete, objective poetics, Pound and the Imagists were attempting to overcome this interpretation of language, but in doing so revealed their fundamental acceptance of that interpretation. As the poet James McMichael says in his unpublished Ph. D. dissertation "Rhetoric and the Skeptic's Void: A Study of the Influence of Nominalism on Some Aspects of Modern American Poetic Style" (1966), "Pound wants very much to believe that word and thing are identical" (119); hence, he aims for an anti-rhetorical, unornamental poetry busy about "things." The ideogram, you might say, presented the possibility of retrieving the magic of language; if, according to Locke, "words . . . stand for nothing but *the ideas in the mind of him that uses them* " (*Essay* III. ii. 2.), then the ideogram, which was believed to go beyond subjective perception to an objective, verifiable, direct image of the thing, or the thing-in-action, itself, must have appeared to present the opportunity of returning to something like an Adamic linguistic simplicity.

Thus it was that the theory of the ideogram, a theory that led to much impenetrable poetry, and many esoteric defenses of that poetry, involved the same basic motive that, in part, attracted Pound to Whitman and urged him toward modernization and a poetry of images, the principle of plainness.

Conclusion

The six poets of this study are of course not the only poets concerned with plainness after the time of Dryden, but they are amongst the most important between Dryden and the first quarter of the twentieth century. After the death of Jonson in 1637, plainness was talked about more in connection with prose than poetry—witness the commentary on the plain style, or styles, of Puritan sermons and the edicts of the Royal Society—though, as we have seen, Dryden was very much a conscious plain stylist and even Milton's blank verse was in part constructed on principles derived from the classical plain style. At the end of the eighteenth century, George Crabbe turned the heroic couplet to new subject matter, to the depiction of the lives of people belonging to the lower and middle classes, and to the accurate description of nature. His realism, which involved a conventional handling of abstractions and an original handling of concrete details, resulted in a plain narrative poetry in heroic couplets. William Wordsworth rejected the heroic couplet, not because of Crabbe, whom he resembles in his interest in both nature and the lives of the humble, but because of the artifice of Neo-classicism, especially as it was expressed in the closed couplet of Pope. Wordsworth found a plainer medium in blank verse, even if in practice his blank verse often is grand or affects grandness. Moreover, Wordsworth was the first poet since the seventeenth century to insist on plainness, to call for a plain diction and syntax that would give us language such as men speak. Thus he initiated the modern debate about plain language in poetry, which involves poets and critics in questions about colloquialism, sincerity, propriety, vulgarity, and so on. Walt Whitman entered the debate in the middle of the nineteenth century and argued for a poetry that would reflect the freedom and the wildness of his still young republic. So the primitive, or the barbaric, came to be revered for its inherent plainness, or simplicity. Believing in imitative form and in essentially Romantic interpretations of such qualities as sincerity, individualism, and intuition, Whitman wrote poetry celebrated for its plainspokenness, for its rolled-up shirtsleeve simplicity and openness. That poetry also has a claim to plainness insofar as its occasional imagistic passages anticipate the "[d]irect treatment of the thing" insisted upon by the Imagists. By this time we are a long way from the plain styles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, Emily Dickinson, whose poetry often displays a barbarism of its own in its wayward syntax, wrote some poems reminiscent of the native plain style in both subject matter and style. Also, her poems that employ what would come to be known as the post-Symbolist method are comparable to poems in the classical plain style in their maturity and indirect directness. Furthermore, her devotion to definitiveness, which contrasts with Whitman's definiteness, reveals a poet preeminently concerned with what we can know, and this concern accounts for the plainness of her poetry in general. In the poetry of E. A. Robinson the principle of plainness finds a much more conventional voice than it does in the poetry of Dickinson. Robinson, indeed, sometimes takes his cue from Crabbe, especially from the abstract quality, and therefore the moral seriousness, of Crabbe's verse. Like Dickinson, too, Robinson was concerned with what we can know, and his poetry is preoccupied with understanding and wisdom, themes that in the hands of a lesser poet might only result in clichés, but in the hands of Robinson result in profundity and a masterful plain style. Ezra Pound continues the Romantic tradition modified by Whitman in that he accepts the fallacy of imitative form as valid and, despite his avowed love for civilisation, advocates the writing of a barbaric poetry. He differs from Whitman, however, in his emphasis on the classical virtues of brevity and clarity, which are central to both his modernization and his Imagist theories. Those theories give an ultimate expression to a nominalist's plainness, but Pound's fear of abstractions rendered the suggestiveness of the Image too vague for precise interpretation, however sharp the focus on the thing itself.

The advent of these various interpretations and expressions of plainness has broadened the appeal of the principle and made it a more fully conscious intention in twentieth-century poetry. The remainder of this conclusion will attempt to illustrate this breadth and examine a few manifestations of the principle.

*

> A new sort of line, omitting memories of trees and watercourses and clouds and pleasant glades—as empty of them as Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* is empty of them—exists today. It is measured by the passage of time without accent, monotonous, useless—unless you are drawn as Dante was to see the truth, undressed, and to sway to a beat that is far removed from the beat of dancing feet but rather finds in the shuffling of human beings in all the stages of their day, the trip to the bathroom, to the stairs of the subway, the steps of the office or factory routine the mystical measure of their passions.
>
> It is indeed a human pilgrimage, like Geoffrey Chaucer's; poets had better be aware of it and speak it—and speak of it in plain terms, such as men will recognize. In the mystical beat of newspapers that no one recognizes, their life is given back to them in plain terms. No one recognizes Dante there fully deployed. It is not recondite but plain.

This passage of less than plain prose comes from William Carlos Williams' Introduction to Allen Ginsberg's *Empty Mirror: Gates of Wrath (1947-52)*.[84] The "It" beginning the second paragraph appears to refer to the "new sort of line" of the first sentence. At any rate, the passage clearly refers to the kind of poetry Ginsberg published in *Empty Mirror*. Ginsberg's indebtedness to Williams and Pound is widely recognised. It is evident in his prose piece, "Poetic Breath and Pound's Usura" (*Allen Verbatim* 161-77), in which he voices his agreement with Williams on the impossibility of using the iambic pentameter line for "the talk of everyday,"[85] and in which he echoes Pound in claiming that "poetry should be at least as well-written as prose. It shouldn't be cornier than prose. . . . I mean it shouldn't contain inversions and upside-down vaguenesses" (166, 172). That it was possible both for Williams to claim plainness for Ginsberg's imagistic and cadenced, prose-like poetry, and for Ginsberg himself to express a desire for clarity and plain or ordinary language in poetry has partly motivated the present study. It is true that an imagistic poetics often results in shimmering details that are at odds with the idea of a plain style, and that the rhetoric of, say, "Howl" actually works against traditional conceptions of plainness because it fails to observe propriety and is not concerned with understanding madness and the personal, social, and historical phenomena that contribute to it, but with bewailing and sentimentalising madness and a mad situation. Indeed, one might argue that "Howl,"[86] or whatever other poem of Ginsberg's that he or Williams might point to as plain, whether it forms images, tells it like it is, or gives utterance to the real language of vulgar men, merely exemplifies a mad sort of plainness. Be that as it may, it behooves us to recognise the interest in being plain and to attempt to understand the reasons for that interest.

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[84] Williams' Introduction is reprinted in Ginsberg's *Collected Poems 1947-80*, 809-10.

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[85] In "How Shall the Poem be Written," however, Cunningham proves that people do sometimes speak in iambic pentameters, though "perhaps more often . . . in the octosyllabic line, in iambic tetrameters" (*CE* 267).

[86] Eric Homberger, in *The Art of the Real* , quotes Ginsberg's comment (*Evergreen Review*, Nov.-Dec. 1959) that "'[i]t probably bugs Williams now, but [the "single breath unit" measure of "Howl" is] a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-daily-talk short breath'" (132). It is not the heightened conversation of "Inviting a Friend to Supper," of course, but Ginsberg claims for "Howl" a conversational style and a naturalness.

Some of the reasons have been presented in this study. Some of them may be traced to modernist sources, especially to the theories of Ezra Pound. But those theories were primarily informed by the Romantic tradition that can be traced from Wordsworth, through Emerson, to Whitman, although the sources of some of Pound's ideas and preoccupations can ultimately be found in the seventeenth century, specifically in the epistemology of Locke and the empiricism of Bacon. Pound's theories have sanctioned the abandonment of metre, and, as Whitman's example showed long before Pound's birth, this abandonment rests upon historical, or political, determinism. J. V. Cunningham, in "The Problem of Form," addresses the subject of America's preference for the informal, and even the antiformal, over the formal:

> We are a democratic society and give a positive value to informality . . . . We will have nothing to do with the formal language and figured rhetoric of the *Arcadia*, for that is the language and rhetoric of a hierarchical and authoritarian society in which ceremony and formality were demanded by and accorded to the governing class. We are reluctant to salute an officer. Instead, we praise, especially in poetry, what we call the accents of real speech–that is, of uncalculated and casual utterance, and sometimes even of vulgar impropriety. Now, if this attitude is a concomitant of the democratic revolution, the value we give to antiformality, to the deliberate violation of form and decorum, is a concomitant of its sibling, the romantic revolution. The measured, the formal, the contrived, the artificial are, we feel, insincere; they are perversions of the central value of our life, genuineness of feeling. 'At least I was honest,' we say with moral benediction as we leave wife and child for the sentimental empyrean.
>
> If informality and antiformality are positive values, then the problem of form is how to get rid of it. (*CE* 247-48)

It might be added that this problem is not a difficult one, at least not for the poet who has never become accustomed to the graces of form. Abandonment is easier than constancy. The poet recognises that form is artificial; the artificial is held to be false, insincere, because it is thought decorative, ornamental; therefore the abandonment of form, as of formal language, makes for truth, sincerity, plainness. The *function* of form, at least in great poetry, has been missed. To equate the artificial with the ornamental is poor logic, and reason tells us that sincerity is potentially, not necessarily, a virtue. But the poet who has abandoned form has often abandoned logic and reason, too. Thus, if he takes his position seriously, he can often be in a poor way, though he find comfort in believing that his principles (poetic and otherwise) and thought are rooted in the democratic way of life that he loves.

Ginsberg is only one postmodernist[87] poet whose work has been described as plain[88] and who has expressed interest in plainness. There are others, including Robert Bly, whose imagistic "Old Boards" is described by the poet Dana Gioia as "a simple, honest poem" that displays "the modest virtues of brevity, directness, and precision." But Gioia also complains that "Bly's initial clarity and simplicity quickly became pious pretension" (216, 217). Bly's "Letter to Her" has a plainness and a naivety at first vaguely reminiscent of the flatter native plain style lyric:

> What I did I did.
> I knew that I loved you
> and told you that.
> Then I lied to you
> often so you would love me,
> hid the truth,
> shammed, lied. (Stanza 1 of 4, Bly 12)

The claim to poetry that these "confessional" and prosaic lines make is in their anti-poetic plainness. What Cunningham says of the flat style of the late sixteenth century might also be said of this poem: "It aims at an unassuming lack of distinction" (*CE* 321), even though it is somewhat presumptuous; it claims plainness in its sincerity and in its conscious avoidance of artifice. Bly might not even mind the objection that it is sentimental; it is conceivable that he would defend his sentimentality in the name of truthfulness.

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[87] Frederick R. Karl may be right when, in *Modern and Modernism*, he says that "[p]ut succinctly: Postmodernism may be an invention of critics" (401).

[88] Robert Pinsky, in *The Situation of Poetry*, describes a passage from Robert Creeley's *Pieces* as having "a winning and useful directness" and a "puritanical, nearly fanatical plainness." Creeley's poem "Diction," too, is characterised by a "dogged, obsessive plainness" (9-10).

In "A Woman Dead in Her Forties," Adrienne Rich, another postmodernist, writes lines that recall both the presumptuous "unassuming lack of distinction" of Bly, and the wilful lack of reason in Ginsberg:

> I'm half-afraid to write poetry
> for you   who never read it much
>
> and I'm left laboring
> with the secrets and the silence
>
> In plain language: I never told you how I loved you
> we never talked at your deathbed of your death
>
> . . . .
>
> but from here on
> I want more crazy mourning, more howl, more keening
> (*The Dream* 57-58)

It is regrettable that Rich fails to transform the plain, honest sentiments of the third stanza into memorable art. What she offers us here is the stuff from which good plain poetry might be made, rather than the poetry itself. There is a hopelessness to the situation in which she, or the speaker, finds herself, and that hopelessness is transferred to the way in which the poem is written. The plainness—the honesty or the sincerity of feeling—is meant to be reflected in the form, or formlessness, of the poem. The last stanza quoted conveys her failure adequately to understand the unfortunate situation in which she has found herself, and portrays her resignation to that failure. It lays claim to plainness by virtue of its honesty or sincerity; it tells us what Rich "wants," and the revelation is a confession in that powerful, irrational feeling is desired for its own sake. The justification for that desire—the death of a friend—cannot be argued with, but it might be said that the poet's failure to understand her situation renders the poem of little value. The subject matter is reduced from the appropriate response of a particular woman in mourning to what that woman desires. Insofar as the plainness results in self-revelation rather than understanding, the poem is sentimental. Hence the conception of plainness maintained by the poet is inadequate; the plainness that may be said to exist in the poem actually and paradoxically works against plainness as a defendable principle.

There are other twentieth-century poets concerned with, even devoted to, plainness. Indeed, there has been a proliferation of them. They include T. S. Eliot, whose career can be seen as moving from the obscure and indirect to the precise and direct, from a preoccupation with the subconscious and connotation, to a preoccupation with consciousness and denotation, and, in Ronald Bush's words, "from a poetry of pure or dramatic lyricism . . . toward a poetry of meditation." As Bush says in *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (1983), Eliot's Christianity urged him to give up "the psychological resonance of his former verse" for "the denotative aspects of language" (113). In the following quotation, the parenthetical comment disrupts the syntax of the third sentence, leaving what is being said at first unclear, but the opening lines of section V of "Little Gidding" nevertheless display a paradoxical plainness and comment on the need for plainness:

> What we call the beginning is often the end
> And to make an end is to make a beginning.
> The end is where we start from. And every phrase
> And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
> Taking its place to support the others,
> The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
> An easy commerce of the old and the new,
> The common word exact without vulgarity,
> The formal word precise but not pedantic,
> The complete consort dancing together)

> Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a
> beginning,
> Every poem an epitaph. (*CP* 221)

This, however, is more a starting place, a flat statement of poetic theory, than the thing, the finished product, itself. But there is a profound concern for plainness, even of a "noticeably unnoticeable" sort, which is the phrase Cunningham uses to describe the classical plain style (*CE* 322). Eliot also spoke of the style described in "Little Gidding" at Yale, in 1933:

> This speaks to me [he says of Lawrence's claim that "the essence of poetry with us in this age . . . is a stark directness, without the shadow of a lie, . . . stark, bare rocky directness of statement"] of that which I have long aimed, in writing poetry: to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem points at, and not the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*. We shall never succeed, perhaps, but Lawrence's words mean this to me, that they express to me what I think that the forty or fifty original lines I have written strive towards. (Matthiessen 89-90)

One can't get a more unnoticeable style than a transparent one. Eliot's desire for transparency echoes, interestingly enough, the "transparent, plate-glassy style" that, as we have seen, Whitman was so interested in (see pages 115-16 above). But, of course, he would have vehemently denied any influence here.

Robert Graves, in "Dance of Words," makes a statement similar to that of Eliot in "Little Gidding":

> To make them move, you should start from lightning
> And not forecast the rhythm: rely on chance,
> Or so-called chance, for its bright emergence
> Once lightning interpenetrates the dance.
>
> Grant them their own traditional steps and postures
> But see they dance it out again and again
> Until only lightning is left to puzzle over–
> The choreography plain, and the theme plain. (200)

The poem asserts the possibility of developing a distinct, individual poetic voice by mastering traditions and conventions. The position is similar to that held by Eliot in "Little Gidding," but the style is more distinguished. Moreover, the last two lines make clear that the style advocated, and more nearly realised than is that of "Little Gidding," is a "noticeably unnoticeable style." The style of "Dance of Words," however, is somewhat noticeable. The loosened pentameter is in part responsible, but more obviously responsible is the desire to impress with modest but inspired figures: the "lightning," "Once lightning interpenetrates the dance," and the "choreography." Even though the poem says that all that should be "left to puzzle over" is the inspiration that brought a poem into being, Graves wants a certain amount of flash to accompany his plainness.

As we have seen in the examples from Bly, Rich, and Eliot, there are poets, or times when poets, want no flash, not the vaguest suggestion of it. The flat style of the sixteenth century manifests the desire for an absolute plainness. This desire is a desire for truthfulness and is characterised by a faith in the ability of language to convey meaning and a distrust of figurative devices. There was a kind of resurgence of the flat style following World War II, with the advent of an anti-poetry, which Michael Hamburger discusses in "A New Austerity," the ninth chapter of his book, *The Truth of Poetry* (1969):

> The new anti-poetry . . . arose from an acute distrust of all the devices by which lyrical poetry had maintained its autonomy. For the new anti-poets it was not enough that poetry should be as well-written as prose. It should also be capable of communicating as directly as prose, without resort to a special language mainly distinguished by its highly metaphorical character. (242)

The new anti-poetry has a "plain, bare, minimal diction" (280), and it can be found, Hamburger tells us, in numerous American, South American, and European poets, including Bertolt Brecht (who anticipates the phenomenon), Eliot, Williams, Hugh MacDiarmid, Pablo Neruda, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Tadeusz Różewicz, who made a paradoxically striking claim when he said, "'I had to rehabilitate banality.' "What he aspired to," Hamburger tells us, "was 'anonymity; lack of creative personality; absence of every kind of originality'" (274).

The experience of the war is not the only reason poets have found to write a plainer poetry; age—simple weariness with figurative language, perhaps, but also a greater need for meaning, for clarity and precision of thought—has also been a significant motivator. Richard Wilbur, in fact, wrote a more figurative poetry in the wake of the war, but grew plainer with age:

> My first poems were written in answer to the inner and outer disorders of the Second World War and they helped me, as poems should, to take ahold of raw events and convert them, provisionally, into experience. At the same time I think that they may at moments have taken refuge from events in language itself—in wordplay, in the coinage of new words, in a certain preciosity. At any rate, my writing is now plainer and more straightforward than it used to be. An adverse critic, considering the same evidence, might say that my language has simply grown dull; I can only hope that he would not be right. (*Responses* 118)

Norman MacCaig is another poet, as John Greening observes in a review of the *Collected Poems*, from whom time and experience have exacted a plainer poetry:

> [I]t takes time to trace this gradual unknotting, simplifying process, MacCaig's increasing impatience with imagery and the eventual substitution of a plain style. "I am growing, as I get older," he writes, "to hate metaphor / to love gentleness / to fear downpours". . . . In a poem describing a glacier in terms of a defeated army, he turns on himself: "What greed and what / arrogance, not to allow / a glacier to be a glacier", concluding with a characteristic twist—"I defend the glacier that / when it absorbs a man / preserves his image / intact". (*Poetry Review* 56)

There is an ambiguity, almost certainly unintended, in the last quotation from MacCaig, for he appears not only to admire the superior ability of the glacier (against that of the poet) to preserve an image, but to comment approvingly on the process of immersion or fusion that the Romantic tradition established and that is at odds with his non-imagistic intentions: the glacier "absorbs a man," whose image of the glacier is perfectly preserved because of the process of fusion. In any case, it is apparent that MacCaig has grown not only tired of figurative language but frustrated and even angry with it. And although that frustration and anger has resulted, on the evidence of the lines quoted, in plain poetry, it is not distinguished poetry. The old poet cannot learn new tricks, or, rather, how to do without tricks.

W. D. Snodgrass testified to a general concern for plainness when he observed in 1975 that "[t]he better poems being produced right now tend to be common-sensical, stylistically almost ordinary—such a voice as you might hear in this world, not a voice meant to lift you out of this world" (*In Radical Pursuit* 55). Taking a broader perspective, Robert Pinsky has detected plainness as a distinctive feature of American poetry from Philip Freneau (1752-1832), to Whitman, to Williams, and beyond. Freneau's "The Indian Burying Ground," Pinsky tells us in *Poetry and the World* (1988), alternates between "language that is effectively formal . . . and contrastingly plain, downright language," between the "partly balanced and decorous, and [the] partly homely and American. A similar doubleness has distinguished great American writers—Dickinson and Whitman, Twain and Melville, Frost and Williams—from mere local colorists and mere imitators of European models" (106-07). In Jean Toomer's "Georgia Dusk" Pinsky finds contrasts between "old richness and new, European and American, exotic and plain," and in American poetry in general he recognises the "exploitation of the English language's immense and bastardized vocabulary, including the abstraction and formality tied to Latinate words, [and] the physicality and plainness of Germanic words" (128, 131).

It has been beyond the scope of this study to examine the work of two of the greatest poets of this century and of American literature: Yvor Winters and J. V. Cunningham. It would be to slight them, however, if something were not said about their poetry by way of conclusion, and they have long since been slighted enough.

More than any other modern poet, Cunningham has been guided in his verse by conceptions, as he tells us in "L'Esprit de Geometrie et L'Esprit de Finesse":

> Yes, we are all
> By sense or thought
> Distraught.
> The violence of reason rules
> The subtle Schools;
> A falling ember has unhinged Pascal.
>
> I know such men
> Of wild perceptions.
> Conceptions
> Cold as the serpent and as wise
> Have held my eyes:
> Their fierce impersonal forms have moved my pen.
> (*Exclusions* 41)

This, in the popular sense of the term, might be called a "confessional" poem. The confession, though, is characteristically marked by a firm control over emotion. There is no sentimentality here, no emotionalism. The subject is our being distraught by either "sense or thought," and Cunningham confesses to being distraught by "Conceptions." The subject, however, overwhelms neither his reason nor the form of his poem. His verse in general is busy about precision of statement, and unlike most twentieth-century poets he is very little concerned with sense perception. This, and Cunningham's rigorous metric, has meant his alienation:

> For My Contemporaries
>
> How time reverses
> The proud in heart!

I now make verses
Who aimed at art.

But I sleep well.
Ambitious boys
Whose big lines swell
With spiritual noise,

Despise me not!
And be not queasy
To praise somewhat:
Verse is not easy.

But rage who will.
Time that procured me
Good sense and skill
Of madness cured me. (*Exclusions* 32)

Cunningham's contempt for the "Ambitious boys," who flaunt their "spiritual noise" and who "rage," is held in check by a scrupulous propriety, but it is by no means diminished by this fact. The subtlety, the indirection of his attack upon his contemporaries is perhaps best seen in the simple line "Verse is not easy," which not only comments explicitly on the difficulty of his art, but implicitly on the relative easiness of metreless verse (the inverted first foot functions in this implicitness).

Epigram 35 of *Epigrams: A Journal* may be read as relating to the subject of "For My Contemporaries," but it attains a broader meaning:

Hang up your weaponed wit
Who were destroyed by it.
If silence fails, then grace
Your speech with commonplace
And studiously amaze
Your audience with his phrase.
He will commend your wit
When you abandon it. (*Exclusions* 82)

The epigram may be read as addressed, ironically and bitterly, to the poet himself. But it may also be read as advice to anyone in the predicament of being susceptible to the caprices of another who is less intelligent but more powerful.

There are different ways in which poets may be great. Poets like Wordsworth, Whitman, and Pound are not great because of any single poem they wrote but because of the entire body of their work and the influence that work has had on contemporary and subsequent poets. That influence may be salutary or pernicious, or both, but it has been great. Cunningham is a great poet by virtue of his having written several great poems and having sustained, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, a classical plain style that is as every bit Cunningham as classical. His style in general may be described as epigrammatic, or what Jonson called the "strict and succinct style" (573). Epigram 35 is a great epigram of plain statement. The epigraph from *The Judge Is Fury* (1947) is at least as great, but the plain style is turned to metaphor:

> These the assizes: here the charge, denial,
> Proof and disproof: the poem is the trial.
> Experience is defendant, and the jury
> Peers of tradition, and the judge is fury. (*Exclusions* 43)

Again, control over diction, syntax, and rhythm gives this epigram an extraordinary force of statement. The statement is not weakened but strengthened by the metaphor of the trial because it is used with the strictest attention to meaning, with the utmost clarity and brevity. This epigram summarises Cunningham's *ars poetica*; its tone is marked by an appropriate hint of fury.

If there is anything wanting in Cunningham's art it is an appreciation for, or a profound handling of, sense perception. In Winters' terms, "Cunningham is seldom perceptive of the physical universe around him; he does not know what to do with it" (*FD* 303). Winters did know what to do with it, and it is fitting, for various reasons, to end this discussion with an examination of a poem by Winters that is as unlike Cunningham's granite plain style as it is the poetry of the Romantics, to whom the poem is to some extent indebted for its subject matter. But the poem is also indebted to the classical plain style, specifically to the heroic couplet as practiced by Jonson and others. "The Marriage" illustrates a plainness characteristic of Winters' best poems:

> Incarnate for our marriage you appeared,
> Flesh living in the spirit and endeared
> By minor graces and slow sensual change.
> Through every nerve we made our spirits range.
> We fed our minds on every mortal thing:
> The lacy fronds of carrots in the spring,
> Their flesh sweet on the tongue, the salty wine
> From bitter grapes, which gathered through the vine
> The mineral drouth of autumn concentrate,
> Wild spring in dream escaping, the debate
> Of flesh and spirit on those vernal nights,
> Its resolution in naive delights,
> The young kids bleating softly in the rain—
> All this to pass, not to return again.
> And when I found your flesh did not resist,
> It was the living spirit that I kissed,
> It was the spirit's change in which I lay:
> Thus, mind in mind we waited for the day.
> When flesh shall fall away, and, falling, stand
> Wrinkling with shadow over face and hand,
> Still I shall meet you on the verge of dust
> And know you as a faithful vestige must.
> And, in commemoration of our lust,
> May our heirs seal us in a single urn,
> A single spirit never to return. (*CP* 126)

Winters was intent upon plainness throughout his career. "My aim," he says in the Introduction to his *Early Poems*, "from the first poem in this collection was a clean and accurate diction and movement, free of clichés; in other respects my methods have altered with the years" (*CP* 17). The early poems are imagistic and in free verse. "The Marriage" is in Winters' mature style; it is composed of heroic couplets, with one triplet before the last couplet, and is imagistic in places but at least as much concerned with accurate statement, or abstraction, as with images, or, more generally, the presentation of concrete details. The method of the poem, then, has an obvious appeal; the poet carefully attends to the world of things as well as to the world of ideas. Because of the sensuous element, the method makes for a certain richness that Cunningham's usual method cannot attain. Cunningham's purer expository method, however, does not aspire to this richness. That it does not attain it is thus not a fault but a limitation of the method: perfection is still possible using the method.

The method used in "The Marriage" is reflected in the subject matter in two ways. First, Winters is concerned with the union of body and soul in the beloved: "Flesh living in the spirit . . ." (line 2). The flesh, that is, lives in accord with the demands of the spirit; the two are fused. The construction offered by Winters raises the flesh without degrading the spirit and without ignoring the claims of the flesh. A more usual construction expressing the union of the two human characteristics would be "spirit living in the flesh," which imparts the suggestion that the sinfulness of the flesh is lessened or ignored for the moment. Winters, as the rest of the poem makes clear, cares neither to ignore the claims of the flesh, nor to downplay their sinfulness. Second, the subject matter not only pertains to the union of flesh and spirit in the beloved, but to the union of the beloved and the speaker. Moreover, their union is physical ("And when I found your flesh did not resist"), spiritual ("It was the living spirit that I kissed / It was the spirit's change in which I lay"), and intellectual ("Thus, mind in mind we waited for the day") (lines 15-18). The poem thus defines the conventional meaning of marriage.

Again, there is a marriage between concept and percept in the poem. Words and phrases like "Incarnate," "endeared / By minor graces and slow sensual change," "the debate / Of flesh and spirit," "Its resolution in naive delights," "mind in mind," "faithful vestige," and "in commemoration of our lust" illustrate Winters' attentiveness to concepts. Marriage itself, of course, is also a concept, though marriage as a temporal particular is at least as important in the poem as marriage as a concept. The attentiveness to percepts, and to the sensual side of marriage, is most clearly evident in the impressive catalogue of delights in lines 6 through 13. Each of the five senses is represented—at least, if the olfactory sense is included in the reference to "the salty wine." However, calling such a sensitive—intelligent—handling of detail a catalogue hardly does it justice. The sensitivity is apparent in the fact that, although we are aware of its being a catalogue or list when we read it, we are probably not aware that the lines take up the senses one after another. The ease and grace of the metre works in the same way. Winters has exploited the flexibility of the run-over couplet, even though only six of the twenty-five lines are enjambed. There is no caesural pattern, and the caesurae can be found in every position in the line except the eighth. There is considerable range, too, in the duration of pause in the caesurae. This is apparent in that many of the pauses (two in line 3, one in lines 4, 5, 18, 22, and 25) are not marked by punctuation. The rhythm of the lines contributes in no small way to the sense of flexibility; each line is as far from the metronome as the natural speaking voice. And yet we hear, or feel, the couplet as we read. But we do not hear the click-click-click of Pope's couplet, which is, in its archetypal form, devoted to wit. Instead, we hear, or feel, the movement of a reasoning mind or what William Bowman Piper calls in connection with Jonson's couplet practice "the shape and flow of reasonable argument."[89] This movement is devoted to plainness, or is a manifestation of plainness, for it is derived from the classical plain style. It is responsible for what Jonson called "a diligent kind of negligence" (580), which Winters' couplets convey. The poem, however, differs from the classical plain style poem of the

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[89] See Piper, *The Heroic Couplet* 67-69. See also pages 79-80 of the present study.

Renaissance in its concern for sense perception, which is a feature mainly Romantic in origin, as is the subject of fusion, which was one that preoccupied Winters.[90] It is decidedly not a Romantic poem, though. For, like Crabbe and Dickinson and Robinson, Winters was a realist. Thus "The Marriage" insists on the reality of concepts and is very much concerned with understanding and with definition. Winters does not allow sense perception to overwhelm him; he finds himself in the experience rather than loses himself.

There are many ways to be plain. "The Marriage," one of the great poems of the twentieth century, demonstrates that one can be plain without ignoring the world of things, and imagistic without forgetting the world of ideas. For Jonson, and no doubt for Cunningham, poetry "can speak to the understanding," and picture "but to the sense" (561). For Pound and other modern and postmodern poets, to speak to the sense was the aim. In his best poems, Winters speaks to both, and the plainness of such poems is manifest. All of these poets, however, would have agreed that, as the song says, "It is a precious jewel to be plain."[91]

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[90] Grosvenor Powell discusses this subject in *Language as Being in the Poetry of Yvor Winters*, in which he claims that Winters accepted "the romantic view that the reader fuses his own being with the universe created in the poem" (4).

[91] The song is "Fine knacks for Ladies" and is attributed to John Dowland (Williams 244).

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